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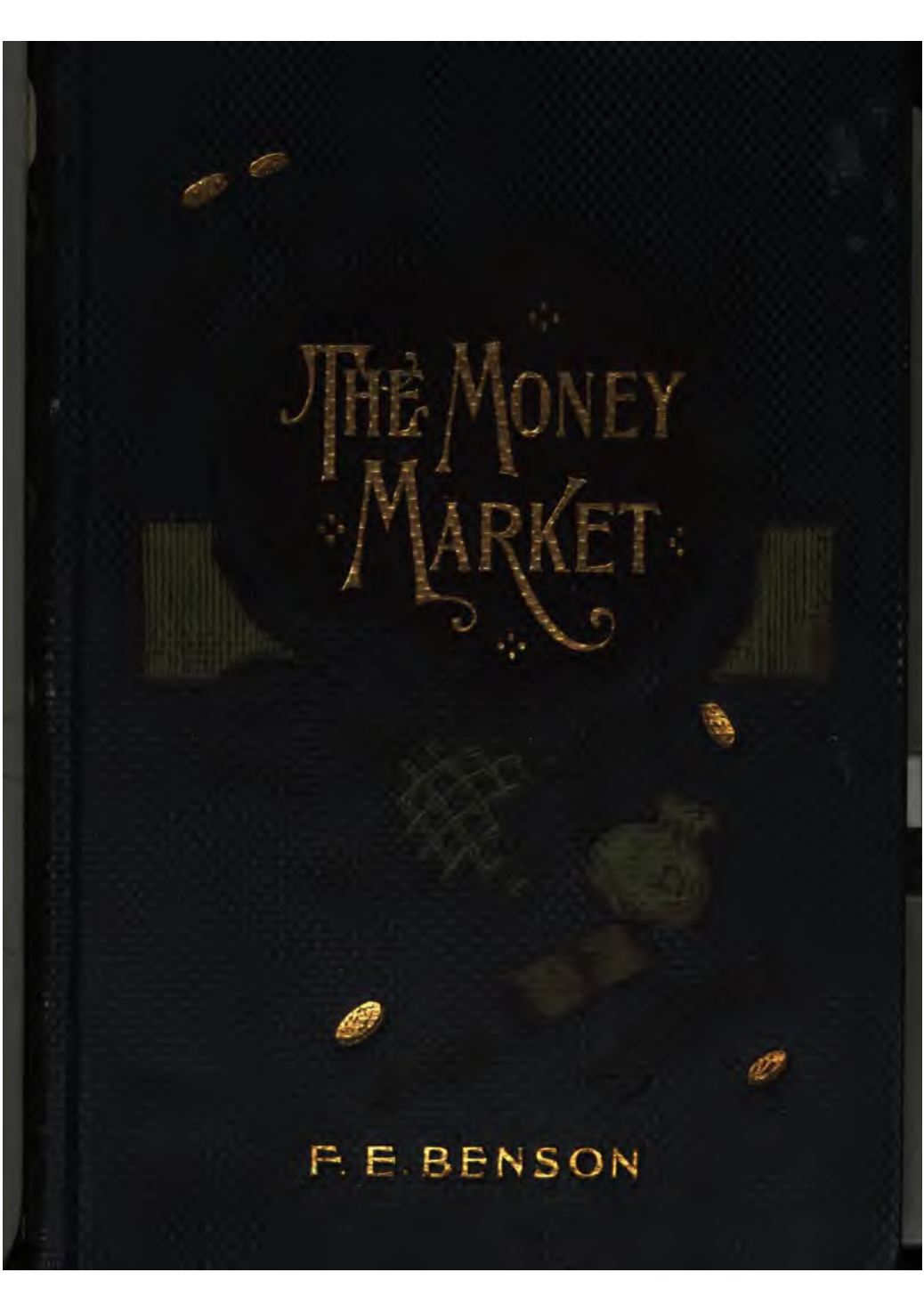
The Money Market



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THE MONEY MARKET

By E. F. BENSON

Author of "Dodo," etc.

have nothing then to say to me?" he asked.

THE

MONEY MARKET

BY

E. F. BENSON

Author of "Limitations," "Dodo," "The Vintage," etc.

"WEALTH MAKETH MANY FRIENDS."—Prov. xix: 4.

Philadelphia

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The Money Market.

CHAPTER I.

The Engagement.

THE curtain fell on the second act of *Tristan und Isolde*, and Lady Stoakley, who had been regarding the stage with a rigid and unmeaning eye, and sitting very upright, leaned back in her chair in the corner of the box, and, opening her fan, began to wave it to and fro, less with the object of cooling herself—for it was a June night with a temperature like that of midwinter in the polar regions—than of occupying her hands; indeed, she shivered as she fanned herself.

"I wish I had a million pounds," she said at length to her companion, in a rather fretful voice, like a child who is not allowed a particular toy.

Mrs. Montgomery did not cease examining the house through her opera glasses, but she sighed sympathetically.

"Yes, dear, we all wish that," she said, without putting down her glasses, "and if we had a million

pounds each we should all wish we had another. Though I am not grasping, not really grasping I mean, I never yet had a thing I liked without wanting another of the same, and I should think that would be particularly the case with a million pounds. Those large round sums must be so satisfactory. Just like big pearls."

"Nonsense, a million is enough for anybody. It is even enough for two," said Lady Stoakley, so sharply that Mrs. Montgomery put down her glasses.

"You are thinking of Percy Gerard?" she asked.

"Of course I am. So are you. We all are. It is supposed to be vulgar to desire or to envy wealth. That is one of those absurd delusions which are confined to the wealthy. In my opinion, it is infinitely more vulgar to pretend not to desire it, besides which no one will believe that one does not. As for the *nouveaux riches*, it is absurd to pose as despising them. Who was it who remarked so excellently that there was no real difference between them and the old poor?"

"I don't know who said it. What did he say, in any case? I should have thought there was all the difference in the world between them."

"No; one seeks to get position by means of its wealth, the other seeks to get wealth by means of its position. It is quite true: there is nothing to choose between them."

Mrs. Montgomery suddenly took up her opera

glasses, as a shooter puts his gun to the shoulder when a bird rises, and let fly a snap-shot into a box opposite. She put them down again with an air of disappointment, as if she had missed.

"There is something in that," she said, "but there is not everything in it. Poor Lord Lanborne, whose blood is so blue that he always looks as if he was freezing, hasn't succeeded very well. He was made a director of some mine, you know, desiring to get wealth, I suppose, by means of his position, and, being conscientious, he thought he ought to go out to the Rand, or Rhodesia, or Rum-ti-foo, or wherever it was, and see the mine. He is one of our more particular peers. But he fell down a shaft, I think they call it, and broke his leg. Within a fortnight the company broke too, and they say the fracture is compound."

"Which—his leg or the company?"

"Both, dear," said Mrs. Montgomery, again seizing her glasses.

Lady Stoakley laughed.

"He and his company are failures, that is all," she said. "If you instance the failure to a rule, you reverse the rule."

"The *nouveaux riches* never fail," murmured Mrs. Montgomery. "Percy Gerard will never fail. There he is; he has just come into the house. How absurdly young he looks."

"He is absurdly young," said Lady Stoakley; "he is only twenty-four, and you see by his grand-

father's will he doesn't come of age till next year. That was so ingenious of old Mr. Gerard; it gives him four extra years. I wish somebody would give me four extra years and a million pounds. But why do you class him among the *nouveaux riches?*"

"I don't know. I suppose because he is so rich. That sort of fortune can't last long, and so it must be *nouveau.* Oh, yes, don't correct me. I know I have contradicted myself. Is it true that he is engaged to Lady Sybil?"

"So her mother says," remarked Lady Stoakley, acidly.

"No doubt. Her mother would say anything. Now, I like Lady Otterbourne; there is no nonsense about her. She knows what she likes, and she says so."

"She doesn't like me," said Lady Stoakley, in a meditative tone.

"No, dear, and she says so," remarked Mrs. Montgomery, signalling violently to Percy Gerard. "Oh, dear! there is the bell, and I wanted to talk to Percy. How tiresome this opera is! It always begins again when one is talking, like the trains that always go on when one is in the refreshment rooms. I always wondered why she didn't like you. Are you going on to Lynn House later? Yes? Let us go together."

Lady Stoakley gave the last act only a scant attention. She thought Wagner as a whole was

ugly, and she thought this particular opera tedious and unmelodious. But it was a gala night,—Jean de Retzke was singing, princes and princesses and stars and garters were like the sand of the sea-shore for number, and it was a matter of course to be there. Also Mrs. Montgomery had distinctly been rubbing her the wrong way. She knew, and all London knew, why Lady Otterbourne disliked her, and all London knew that she resented and returned the dislike with great frankness and no show of dissimulation. She had tried deliberately and purposely—so thought Lady Otterbourne and the world in general—to catch Percy Gerard for her own daughter, Blanche. He was desirable in every way; she liked him; she believed him pre-eminently upright and respectable; and he was enormously wealthy. Those who were not fond of Lady Stoakley were free to believe that this last qualification was the only essential she demanded, and, with that candour which delights in stating malicious things, they said so. But in this they erred. She liked him, and she liked his millions; and she liked them each for their own sakes. Which she liked the best, it is beside the mark to enquire; but an uncharitable assumption would be entirely out of place.

Just before the curtain rose the door of the box opened and Lord Stoakley came in, but neither of the ladies took the slightest notice of him, and he did not appear surprised. He was a man of chronic

and extreme middle-age, equally removed from youth and old age; and, as far as the memory of his friends served them, he had never been otherwise. He could as little have contemplated committing a deliberate heroism as of committing a deliberate folly or making an unsafe investment. He had a careful little manner, and he was studiously polite to his wife. The obscurity of his presence was really glaring, and he had to a remarkable extent what we may call the quality of obliviality, for it was next to impossible to remember that he was present.

"You may not have heard the news," he remarked, as he sat down, after bowing to Mrs. Montgomery's averted profile, "and I came here because I thought you would like to know it. Percy Gerard has just written to me, as his guardian, saying he intends to marry Lady Sybil Attwood. Of course I gave my consent, and they are engaged. I could not have desired a better match for him."

Mrs. Montgomery, having in her mind what the world said Lady Stoakley had planned for Blanche, cleared her throat delicately. But Lady Stoakley answered at once.

"My dear Jack," she said, "I have known it for months."

"But I only received the note after dinner, dear Mabel," he said; "so you cannot have known it so long, if you will pardon my contradicting you. In fact, you cannot have known it at all. Percy,

you see, had to get my consent, which I telegraphed to him half an hour ago."

"I have known it was certain, I meant," said she; "it has been in the air."

"It has reached ground," he said; "Percy is coming to see me to-morrow. There will be a great deal of business to go through and settlements to make. But, indeed, I am not yet quite sure whether, under his grandfather's will, he may marry until his twenty-fifth birthday."

"You will find it difficult to persuade Lady Otterbourne of that," remarked Mrs. Montgomery. "When is he twenty-five?"

"In September; he will only have to wait a few months. Indeed, the marriage could hardly take place before."

"Oh, he is a good young man, and Lady Otterbourne knows it," said Lady Stoakley, viciously. "She will rest on her oars awhile now. Really, for a middle-aged woman, her exertions have been immense."

Mrs. Montgomery turned to watch the progress of the opera, and abstained from smiling. Poor dear Mabel really gave herself away dreadfully sometimes. For a woman of forty to talk about other people being middle-aged was more than a trifle dangerous, and Mrs. Montgomery reflected with thankfulness that she herself was only thirty-nine and passed for thirty-five at the most, and had a birthday very conscientiously and with-

out any attempt at concealment every eighteen months.

Lady Stoakley was probably to be classed as a selfish woman, but she certainly had the maternal instinct. She had worked and slaved on her daughter's account, and she was willing to go on doing so as long as she could stand. She had taken her to balls and "At Homes" and concerts with the most devoted regularity, and there was no denying that the engagement of Percy Gerard to somebody else was a blow. How Blanche herself would take it she could not guess, but it was always impossible to guess how Blanche would take anything. She was a young lady with a great gift of giving surprises to those who knew her best, and her mother had long ceased to be surprised at her except when she behaved in a way that was not surprising. Certainly she had been fond of Percy; and, Lord Stoakley being his guardian, it had been natural for him to be often at the house. Indeed, as long as he had been at school he had spent his holidays there, and the two in those days had been the most excellent friends. Nor had the boy-and-girl intimacy ever ceased; but what Lady Stoakley did not know was whether it had ripened in a manner corresponding to their years. Blanche was on somewhat intimate terms with a rather large number of eligible and ineligible young men, and it was impossible for any one but herself to know how

she ranked them in her affection, but her mother guessed that she put Percy rather high. Still, as long as she did not put him in a class by himself there was no harm done, only her labour had been wasted. Most girls in a similar case, however, would, if they had been at all in love with a man who was engaged to some one else, give no sign of any sort or kind, but present a stony, non-committing silence; and thus it was well on the cards that Blanche would tell her all about it.

To-night she was not at the opera, having pleaded fatigue; and Lady Stoakley determined not to go to her supper-party at Lynn House, but return home and give the news to her daughter. In fact, it was hardly worth while waiting for the end, and about the middle of the *Liebestod* she rose with a rustle.

"I think I shall go home. The noise is deafening: it is like Victoria Station," she said to Mrs. Montgomery. "Make my excuses to the Seymours, will you? I am rather tired, and I want to see how Blanche is. She has not been well all day."

Blanche had not yet gone to bed when Lady Stoakley reached home, and seemed surprised to see her mother so soon.

"You are early," she said, "and where is father? I thought he went to the opera."

Lady Stoakley thought a moment.

"Yes, he left the opera with me," she said; "but I can't remember. Oh, yes, I dropped him at his club."

Blanche made no reply, and Lady Stoakley went straight to the point.

"I have heard some news to-night," she said. "Percy Gerard is engaged to be married."

"To whom? Lady Sybil, I suppose."

"Yes. Is it not a surprise to you?"

Blanche raised her eyebrows, which were very pretty and delicately stencilled.

"Oh, no! Percy told me about his feelings for Sybil himself long ago. It was a surprise to me then, I grant; but I have got used to it. He and I are going to be brother and sister. I think it will be charming. I haven't got any brothers, and he hasn't got any sisters. Isn't that convenient?"

Lady Stoakley looked at her daughter impatiently. This might mean nothing or it might mean a good deal.

Blanche was lying back in a low chair, and her hands were clasped behind her head. She was dressed in white, and her face, nearly as white as her dress, was cut out like a faultless cameo against the dark background of her chair. Her light hair grew low on her forehead, and surmounted a broad oval face, Greek in line, but with a firmness of mouth and chin which would perhaps have seemed more in place on the face of a handsome boy. She lounged rather than sat, and one leg was crossed over the other, and there was so absolute a naturalness in her position that one almost forgot how un-

becoming it was. She looked blatantly indifferent to the news.

"Decidedly girls are puzzles to their mothers," thought Lady Stoakley. Then aloud:

"What do you mean. Blanche?"

The girl sat up.

"Dear mother, I happen to mean just precisely what I say. I love Percy—I mean it—and he loves me. We are to be brother and sister. Oh dear, no, we are not what is called in love with each other, we simply love each other. Oh! I shall be Lady Sybil's sister-in-law in that case; well, we must take the good with the bad. I don't like her; I told Percy so. Perhaps I shouldn't have, but I felt I had to; you see, I have always told him everything."

"What did he say to that?"

"He said I lost a great deal by not liking her," said Blanche; "but he is in love with her, you see. I suppose that makes a difference."

"Probably. And she certainly has a great charm for many people. He was at the opera to-night with them."

"Yes, he told me he was going. Poor Percy!"

Lady Stoakley looked up.

"Why that?"

"Oh, I don't know; but I have a sort of idea that—that—no, I won't say it. Yet, why shouldn't I? Let me put it as a riddle. What is Lady Otterbourne fondest of?"

"Diamonds," said Lady Stoakley, promptly and venomously.

"Exactly. She has got a diamond for Lady Sybil in Percy. Will he make her an allowance, do you suppose? She is very poor, isn't she?"

"Where she gets her money from, I don't know," said Lady Stoakley.

"Well, she has got to Golconda now," remarked Blanche. "And I think that Lady Sybil is fond of Golconda, too. No doubt she is in love with Percy, but I can't help thinking that she would never have allowed herself to if he had been poor. Therefore, Poor Percy!"

Lady Stoakley always drank a cup of hot water in the evening to take away the effects of an unhealthily spent day, and she was sipping it meditatively.

"You didn't happen to say 'Poor Percy' to him, did you?"

Blanche got out of her chair, and rose slowly to her tall and slender height.

"No. The dear boy was so happy, and he so evidently wanted me to consider him the most enviable of mortals. Oh! mother, I asked him to lunch to-morrow, and he and I are going to Lord's afterwards. Lady Sybil is to be there, and we are all going to be brothers and sisters. I hope I shan't find it very difficult to be Sybil's sister. But it wasn't my plan; it was Percy's."

CHAPTER II.

Percy.

PERCY GERARD had the rare distinction of being considered, for quite six weeks of that London season, one of the legitimate subjects of conversation. He even ousted the weather from its immemorial position of premier topic, although the arctic character of June that year was really remarkable. How much the distinction is worth, there may be two opinions; of the rarity of it there can be but one, for six weeks is an immense time, since each season is a year, and, at the pace London goes, each year a lifetime. To those who knew his history—and there were few who did not—he appeared to be a really picturesque figure, and when an eminently dull and ugly age labels a figure picturesque, there can be no doubt that such a one is certainly not dull and ugly. To take the lowest view of him, he was assuredly more intelligent than the greater part of his world, and much more good-looking. His intelligence was shown in many ways: in the first place, though he had known that there would never be the slightest need for him, from a monetary point of view, to stir a finger or think a thought, he had worked hard enough to get an appointment in the Foreign Office; and in

the second, he was well aware that, though to be very rich is quite sufficient passport to enable any one to make his way, not only unhindered but also welcome, into the most charmed of circles, there is another standard possible, and that a very rich man may still be exceedingly incomplete in every other way. He realised, also, that, though a lazy self-sufficiency is widely considered to be the sufficient social equipment for a rich man, the same quality is in itself a poisonous thing; and he was modest, not from any sense of the value of the commodity, but from native propensity. For a rich and handsome young man to be modest he found to be considered in the minds of certain people a pose, but he did not trouble himself much about what conclusions such minds might choose to draw. Further, he had developed in him a very strong sense of drama; he could not help formulating to himself how other people struck him, and, as a corollary to this, how he struck himself. He was thus studiously critical of his own behaviour.

His connections and history were certainly deserving of a passing consideration. His grandfather, from whom he inherited his great wealth, had been in business. From this business he retired early with a small fortune, but when he died he was found to be enormously wealthy. The will was proved, but no more, as far as was known, was forthcoming about the manner in which he obtained his wealth. He had lived a quiet town-life till he

was sixty years old, when he had suddenly bought the country house of the Marquis of Abbotsworthy, an enormous eighteenth century building of red brick, added to a castellated barrack of the sixteenth century, with acres of greenhouse, a huge estate, and a ghost. Here he had moved with his son and daughter-in-law and Percy, who was then a baby; and here he spent his remaining years, never again setting foot in London. The last nine years of his life, indeed, he devoted to two pursuits. From the first of April every year till the last day of September, he spent his whole time on the river Itchen fishing for trout; and on the 1st of October he began to play picquet, and played it till the last day of March. He never had his house empty, and during the winter months it was always filled with picquet players, during the summer with fishermen. Percy's father had died a year or two only after his son's birth, and his wife, Lady Alicia, had survived him not more than three years. Old Mr. Gerard finally had died when Percy was only ten, and since his death, now fourteen years ago, the estate had been managed for the boy by his guardians. The house itself had been let for ten years to some Americans, who had renewed the lease for another five. It would thus fall vacant again the year Percy attained his majority, and their application for the renewal of it he had, owing to his approaching marriage, decided to refuse.

Of his mother Percy only retained a very faint reminiscence; his father he did not remember at all, but he had some distant recollection of his red dress-jacket. He had been killed in some punitive expedition in Africa, in rescuing a wounded comrade under fire, and had he lived he would have received the Victoria Cross. With the name of his mother, who died very suddenly when he was only five, he associated a hitherto vague vision of a dark, beautiful woman, but now more vivid to him since he had known Lady Sybil, who was her second-cousin. Indeed, it was strange how that dim figure had started into distinctness; he even began to recollect little tricks of manner peculiar to her, and shared by his *fiancée*. She had the same habit of looking over the heads of people, the same exquisite freshness of face, the same slow and graceful movements. How extraordinary such coincidences were! In the face of his future wife his mother lived again, and he had his childlike adoration for her still burning.

Lord Stoakley, who was a man of great sense, the natural outcome of a life-time of middle age, had brought up the boy with great simplicity. He had been sent to Winchester, and after Winchester he had passed a year and a half abroad, learning French and German. At twenty-one he had got a nomination for the Foreign Office examination, and had entered it as a junior clerk. From that time he had lived ten months of the year in London,

spending his leave in Scotland or down in the country. Till he was twenty-three he had been kept in ignorance of how enormous was the fortune of which he would, in two years, become master, and when it was made known to him his manner of receiving it was absolutely unaffected and thoroughly characteristic.

"What a bore!" he said. "It is too much for one."

Lord Stoakley, who had communicated the news to him, was almost playful.

"You can always ask some one to share it with you," he said, "and thus there will be others as well."

Percy sighed.

"I shall have to marry," he said. "What a responsibility!" and his handsome boyish face clouded a moment, and then cleared. "But perhaps no one will marry me," he added hopefully.

Lord Stoakley expressed neither support of nor dissent from this view, and the boy went on:

"How did my grandfather make such a fortune?" he asked. "Was his father very wealthy?"

"No, Percy," said Lord Stoakley; "he made his fortune, in the main, himself. How, I am not at liberty to tell you. I cannot even tell you how large, exactly, your fortune will be; but you will be one of the richest men in England. But on your twenty-fifth birthday, the day on which, as he arranged, you come into your property, I shall give

you certain instructions and a sealed letter from him, which, perhaps, will tell you the history of his fortune. Till then you are to remain in ignorance."

"Why, it is like a play," cried the lad. "A sealed letter, on the day one comes of age! How exciting!" And he laughed.

Certainly Fortune, who often showers her favours so blindly and indiscriminately and with so glaring a want of taste, seemed here to have chosen a suitable recipient. Percy was essentially simple-minded, as it is right for rich men to be; he was built of kindness, and his life was stainless. But he had also in him an ingredient which Nature should never forget to put in, when she is compounding the substance of one who will be a millionaire, —namely, an extraordinary delight in beautiful things, and a most accurate perception of what is beautiful and what is not. Editions of books which were remarkable only for their rarity did not appeal to him at all; but he coveted with all the ardour of a bibliomaniac a beautiful edition of a book he loved. He detested artificiality, and the fashion of the day meant nothing to him. Beautiful things were desirable only for their beauty, and in no way because they were either rare or ancient; and because people chose to load their rooms with examples of Dresden china, only remarkable for the difficulty which had been overcome in the representation of lace in porcelain, he

saw no reason for making his own rooms unlivable-in. The consequence of this gospel of æsthetics was that they were a strange jumble of admirable objects. A few of the pictures from Abbotsworthy he had moved up to London, and a dreamy child's face of Greuze looked at him from over his writing-table, and a Corot hung over the chimney-piece, on which stood a painted terra-cotta from Tanagra, and two pieces of old Satsuma ware. His theory was that all beautiful things are of one family, and each sets off the other, just as the beauty of a blonde is seen best when it is near the beauty of a brunette, and that of the brunette when near the blonde. Certainly, so he thought, Corot, though a painter of the North, was closely allied in genius to the potter who had fashioned that exquisite clay sketch which stood just below the twilight scene. In both there was the same unerring perception of when to stop, the same entire absence of irritating detail; above all, the same power of arresting and expressing a moment. One knew, looking at the Corot, that the next instant another layer of dusk would have fallen over the sky, the red cap of the peasant woman would have been black, a star more conjectured than actually seen would have become luminous. So, too, with the Greek figurine; for one moment only the slim graceful girl stood like that, one hand wrapped in her shawl, the other just raising to her face her palmate fan; the next she would have sat down on the rock behind her, and

have begun fanning herself. Masters whose paintings were chiefly remarkable for their line and composition he was content to have in photograph; but he would not have exchanged his one little water-color Turner for the first proofs of all the engravings of the artist, nor again would he have taken a picture of Rembrandt in exchange for his three Rembrandt etchings. To the point of his finger-tips the lad was an artist—not creative, but critical. His moral and physical life was similarly directed by the critical faculty. Without in any way being a *poseur*, he had the habit of regarding as a spectator his own life, and his taste was fastidious. Immorality, to take it on the lowest grounds, seemed to him an ugliness, and he never sought for nasty arguments to justify nasty things. Uprightness and straightforward dealing were natural to him, and he took immense and simple pleasure in simple things. He was never bored, because he could turn from one pursuit to another without any diminution of zest. Finally, he liked his fellow-men, and the word in the dictionary least applicable to him was prig.

This happy fathom of humanity was seated at breakfast on the morning after the opera with a school-friend, Ernest Fellowes, who was staying with him. In spite of the remarkable dissimilarity between the two, they had a cordial affection for each other, and utterly disagreed on every subject under the sun.

"It's easy enough for you to smile at life," Fellowes was saying, "in fact it would be gross ingratitude of you to do otherwise; indeed, I don't see how you could do otherwise. But we are not all millionaires with excellent digestions, engaged to professional beauties; and it would be the merest affectation if I pretended to find such pleasure in life as you do without any affectation at all."

"Oh, that's rot!" said Percy, genially. "You find in life exactly what you choose to find in it; it all depends on how you look at things. If I woke up and found myself a bootblack, I should require a few days for readjustment, but at the end I should spit on my brushes with entire cheerfulness. It would be more difficult to remain cheerful if one had a bad digestion, but no doubt one would find some way of doing it."

"And how if you found yourself what I am?" said the other; "if you, for some inexplicable reason, believed yourself to be less incapable of writing novels than of any other pursuit, and if the public viewed your masterpieces with distressing composure?"

"My dear fellow, what does the public matter to an artist? If there is one thing in the world sweeter than to have your merit recognized, it is to have your merit unrecognized. Think of Corot, think of Millet, of—of—of any great artist!"

"I would sooner not die in a garret," said Fellowes decidedly, "though perhaps it is a matter of

taste. But, though I don't suppose I shall do that, what can be more ignoble than to do as I do? To believe myself capable—for I do so believe, worse luck—of writing something which may be worth reading, and to have to keep the pot boiling by writing critical notices of books I haven't read, and grind out so much work a week, as if I was a convict who had to mount so many steps of the treadmill every hour."

"Of course if you regard your work in that sort of way, no wonder you lose all self-respect."

"My dear fellow," said Ernest, "it is a rank impossibility to be a critic for a penny paper and attempt a high line. Editors don't want high lines."

Percy looked at him rather shyly.

"Ernest, why are you so absurd?" he said. "Why can't you put your twopenny pride in your pocket, give up that sort of work, and do as I have so often asked you, and——"

"Sponge upon you?"

"That is an offensive way of putting it. You are offensive this morning, you know. Oh, don't apologize."

"I wasn't going to," remarked Fellowes, with a smile that he could not suppress; "nothing was further from my thoughts."

"I knew you weren't," said Percy. "I said it to excuse the absence of the apology. I really cannot understand making such a fuss about a few pounds. You, unfortunately, have too little; I, in

this instance, fortunately, have too much. Nature demands a readjustment. You are proud, obstinate, ungenerous, and vain."

"Why vain?"

"Because you prefer to pose as a martyr than to pocket your pride. A lot you care about your art!"

"More than the public does."

Percy raised his eyes in despair.

"Ernest, you are either a cynic," he said, "or you have the lowest view of your work that I ever heard of, if you expect the public to care as much for your work as you do yourself. I don't know which would be the silliest. It is exceedingly silly to be a cynic, but perhaps the other is the more despicable. About your sponging on me, as you call it——"

"I'll apologize for that."

"It is the first sign of grace I have ever observed in your conduct. Well, about that, it isn't as if I was making a sacrifice."

Ernest smiled at him.

"Percy, you are the best fellow in the world, I believe," he said; "but you don't understand. If you were offering me something which really cost you a sacrifice, I should take it. It is taking what you don't want that beats me."

Percy rescued a struggling fly from the cream jug, silently and with immense care, and sat watching it brushing its head with its forelegs for a minute or so.

"Ah, that is a new point of view," he said at

length, "and it is rather a delicate one. Oh, you have perception at times, I don't deny it," and he laughed.

"But it doesn't convince you that I am right?"

"No, it certainly doesn't. It is a little too subtle to be of any practical value; but it implies a certain delicacy. Put it in your next book."

"The devil take my next book!" said Ernest. "But there's my reason for not accepting your offer. If you ever come to your last shilling, and I haven't got a penny, I'll take sixpence."

"All right, that is a bargain. In the meantime——"

"In the meantime I shall take one of your cigarettes," said Ernest, leaving the table and opening a silver cigarette box. "Hullo, it's the last!"

"According to your own showing, then, you are bound to take it," said Percy, "because I want it; but I hope you won't."

Ernest had taken up a knife from the table.

"I shall cut it in half," he said, "and I shall take one half and you shall take the other. Thus we shall be consistent. In the meantime you shall send for some more."

Percy picked up a torn taggy section.

"You've taken the biggest half," he said, reproachfully. "That does not show the delicacy I had credited you with."

Percy lunched with the Stoakleys, and after lunch he and Blanche went to Lord's, where they met

Lady Sybil and her mother, and watched the cricket for an hour or two. Blanche returned early, as her mother had a dinner-party that night, and people had to be looked out in Debrett. Lady Stoakley was not yet in, and Blanche had tea by herself, looking unusually grave. After tea she got out the list of guests, and sat down to wrestle with precedence, but her eye kept wandering from the paper, and for half an hour she contemplated an irregular oval which she had drawn on a half-sheet of paper, which was meant to represent the dining-room table, without putting any names round it. Younger sons of earls and eldest sons of viscounts seemed to her hardly distinguishable. At last she got up and walked to the window. The sun was swung westward, and she drew up the Venetian blind which had kept the room cool during the day. Outside, St. James's park was enveloped in a blue haze of heat, and the dusky London grass was dotted with groups of people. The traffic of Pall Mall hummed in the air like the *bourdon* note of some great organ, with a drowsy persistence now swelling into a crescendo, and now diminishing again, but never stopping. She saw and heard only half consciously, only half consciously she felt the cool lifting of her hair in the evening breeze. Then suddenly her eyes grew moist with tears.

"Oh, poor Percy! poor Percy!" she said aloud.

CHAPTER III.

At Lord's.

LADY SYBIL and her mother stopped later at Lord's, and did not leave till half-past six, when stumps were drawn. Percy was to dine with them *en famille* and afterwards they were going to see La Dusé in *Magda*. He put them into their carriage at the gate, and as there was still plenty of time, he walked down towards Baker Street, for the sake of the exercise. He was intensely, almost riotously happy; he had his boots infamously mishandled by a ragged Ishmaelite boy, to whom he gave sixpence, and he bought a carnation from a flower-girl without remembering that he had already a gardenia given him by Sybil in his buttonhole. That, of course, it was impossible to part with, and with a delicate gentleness he walked on with his carnation in his hand till he was out of sight of the girl, and then bestowed it on an iron railing, smiling to himself out of sheer happiness. He devoted two minutes of serious consideration to a couple of colored chalk drawings made on the pavement by an extremely prosperous-looking street craftsman with the air of an Academician, and was conscientiously able to declare that they contained no merit of any kind whatever, and no seed of any

sort of promise. One represented a forest scene with an amazing number of trees, resembling amorphous ferns, reflected in a woodland pool of violent blue surrounded by black fantastic rocks; and the other a blinding snowstorm at sea, with the lines of a vessel dimly descried throwing up a sickly green rocket. So classic an example of the violation of all the canons of art in two small pictures seemed to him to be worth a shilling, which he bestowed with complete gravity.

Indeed, he had reason to be happy, for he was an accepted lover, and the world can never hold a better fate than that. How unspeakably charming Sybil had been that afternoon, and what an incredible ignorance she had shown of the elements of cricket! Eighty runs had been scored for three wickets in the first innings when they arrived, and she asked him with the intensest curiosity "which side was beating." To enlighten so radical a want of knowledge, it had been necessary to begin with "You see those three sticks there? Well, they are called stumps." But she had not been satisfied with this elementary instruction, and before an hour was up she had fully grasped the meaning of "yorker" and "break from the off," as well as being able to give a wrong name to a majority of the field. By a fine stroke of reasoning she had announced that a man caught by long-on was caught by "the man at pull," and with equal felicity she dubbed "point" the "cutter."

At the close of the first innings they had left the pavilion and walked with Blanche to the gate, to see her into a hansom, and had then strolled round the ground together. They met numberless people they knew, and received scores of congratulations, for their engagement had been in the morning papers that day. Percy had been universally acknowledged to be the great catch of the year, and Sybil was an acknowledged beauty. The event therefore was of some interest. Sybil received their congratulations with a sort of shy pleasure which seemed to Percy ineffably charming. Then, after they had strolled half round the ground:

"Oh, Percy," she had said, "how kind every one is! They really seem to be happy that we are so happy. But take me back again to the Pavilion. I can't see any more people now. They seem," and she paused,—"they seem to come between you and me."

Later, while Percy was making his pleasant way down Baker Street, and living over again the delicious moments of that afternoon, Lady Otterbourne and Sybil, both sitting very upright in their victoria, were taken towards Bruton Street. Sybil's face was prettily flushed, and her eyes were very bright, as if she had been playing some game of skill with well-earned success. But the corners of her beautiful bow-shaped mouth drooped a little, as if the game had tired her. Lady Otterbourne, on the other hand, showed no traces of fatigue.

She was a tall finely-made woman, only just over forty and the years had but embellished her. She had been the second wife of the late Lord Otterbourne, who had died some two years after his marriage, leaving her with the one child and a somewhat insufficient allowance. But she had met the world boldly, and as Sybil grew up, clever, winning and beautiful, she felt that the money she was so lavish with in order to give the girl a good chance was merely an investment sure to yield high interest. That she had money troubles all the world knew; once a considerable sum had been given her by her stepson, the present Lord Otterbourne, to extricate her from an exceedingly tight place, and shield her from declared bankruptcy; but he had intimated on that occasion that any further application to him would be vain, and that he neither would nor could pay any more of her debts. The estate was already encumbered with heavy charges, and it could not be further drained. Lady Otterbourne had told him with embarrassing frankness on this occasion that she knew the poverty of the estate only too well, and that she was fully aware that he had not at all approved of the father's second marriage. That, however, had been his father's affair, and his son could not possibly regret the step more than his second wife had done. She made her bow to him.

But Providence had not forgotten the widow and the fatherless. If in the length and breadth of

England she had been given a free hand to choose a husband for Sybil, she would not have chosen otherwise. Percy was grandson of a duke on his mother's side; and if no one knew much about the parentage of his grandfather, so much the better. Best of all, he was, for all practical purposes (and Lady Otterbourne was very practical), a man of unlimited means. Abbotsworthy House was fit for a royal prince, and Sybil would be mistress of it. Percy himself was admirably well-bred, he was good-looking, and, morally, not even the best of his friends—for he had no enemies—could find a word to say against him. He was not, it is true, of quite the type of young man which Lady Otterbourne found amusing; he was too fond of simple pleasures, and scandalous stories did not interest him in the smallest degree. Indeed the only time Lady Otterbourne had seen him forget his manners was when she told him a very *ben trovato* story about a mutual friend. He had turned on her with a scowl:

"I don't want to hear that sort of thing," he had said. "If it is true, it should never have been repeated; and if it is untrue, it is scandalous."

But his admirable character and his simple pleasures had much more to recommend them than the reverse would have had; and he was very safe, which was delightful for Sybil. But certainly his explanations about cricket had been a trifle wearisome and no wonder Sybil looked a little tired.

"Percy was really rather long-winded about that tiresome game," she remarked to her daughter. "What pleasure there can be in seeing a man hit a ball with a piece of wood I cannot conjecture. The English classical games are absolutely unintelligible."

"Oh, I thought it was thrilling!" said Sybil.

Her mother looked at her dryly.

"You behaved very well, dear," she said, and added to herself, "But such behaviour is unnecessary now."

"Behaved well? What do you mean, mother?"

"Dear child," said Lady Otterbourne, "it was very nice and wise of you to seem so interested. It is admirable for a man if he is able to be pleased and interested in that sort of game. I envy the people with simple athletic tastes, but I can't understand them."

A look—it would be exaggeration to call it foxy—came into Sybil's face. Her nose seemed to get just a shade sharper, and her lips compressed.

"Percy is so much interested in so many things," she said.

"Yes, dear, and it will be your business to keep him interested in them. Of course he will resign his clerkship in the Foreign Office, for that keeps him ten months of the year in London, but otherwise the more things he takes an interest in the better. I hope, for instance, he will go into Parliament,—that is always considered respectable.

Again, he might take to farming. He has a great deal of practical ability, and endless interest in details. I believe one needn't lose very much money if one manages a farm carefully. Luckily, Percy needn't consider that," and she sighed amorously.

"How did his grandfather make his fortune?" asked Sybil.

"I don't know. I asked Percy about it, but even he didn't know. He told me something about a sealed letter to him from his grandfather, which would be placed in his hands in September, on his twenty-fifth birth-day. That will be just before your wedding, Sybil. However, his grandfather did make a fortune: there is no doubt about that, and really that is all that matters."

"It is interesting," said Sybil. "I wonder if Percy will tell me when he knows?"

"I shouldn't ask, if I were you. It cannot possibly matter, and if it was made in some—well, some rather shady way, it is just as well that it should not be known. Some people are so absurd and old-fashioned."

"I don't feel as if I should mind much," said Sybil, "the making of it is so remote. How can it concern Percy?"

"Of course, that is the only view to take," said Lady Otterbourne. "A sovereign made in selling adulterated beer is just as good as any other sovereign. Certainly as long as one has not had a hand in the making of it oneself, there

is nothing that can matter less than how it has been made."

"Isn't there some phrase, 'an accomplice after the fact?'" asked Sybil.

"No doubt there are all sorts of phrases," said her mother. "But probably Mr. Gerard's money was made in some honest, wholesome trade; and even if it were not so, it concerns nobody now."

Lady Otterbourne lived in a small house in Bruton Street, left her for her life by her late husband. She used never to come to London before Easter, and she let it when she was fortunate, for seven or eight months in the year. This brought her in a sum of money which was often very useful to her, for she was deliberately extravagant, and, as has been stated, her allowance was not large. Her stepson, a man whom Lady Otterbourne considered of an antiquated and absurd type, had much disliked her letting it. The house had been meant, he said, for her to live in, and it was lowering the dignity of the family to do anything but let it stand empty when she was not there. Lady Otterbourne was frankly unable to understand such an argument, and instanced a hundred people who did the same. And as he had no reply ready for the retort that it was beneath the dignity of an earl to leave his wife with the means of a housekeeper, she considered the argument closed.

It was nearly time to dress for dinner when they reached Bruton Street, but Lady Otterbourne lin-

gered a few minutes over some letters in her morning room before consigning herself to her maid. One seemed to cause her some agitation, and she walked up and down her room before sitting down to answer it. Even then she only dipped the pen in the ink and threw it down again. Eventually she wrote and addressed a telegram:

"Please come to see me here to-morrow at eleven."

CHAPTER IV.

Lady Otterbourne's Visitor.

SYBIL went out after breakfast next morning to ride her bicycle in the Park, where Percy was to meet her, and Lady Otterbourne was glad to find that she was still out at eleven, when she expected her visitor. Shortly after the clock had struck she saw from the window of her morning room a hansom drive up and a young man get out. She had told her servant that she was at home to a Mr. Samuelson, and in a few moments he was shown up.

He was quite young, not more than two or three and twenty, urbane and self-possessed, and he looked perfectly English. In fact, he was a shade too self-possessed, he was too clearly accustomed to consider himself a gentleman; it must have been a habit of his to assure himself of it often. He bowed to Lady Otterbourne, who remained seated, and said:

"Your ladyship asked to see me this morning."

"Mr. Samuelson?" asked Lady Otterbourne.

"Yes; my father was away, and in his absence I thought it better to come myself than to send one of our clerks to see you."

Lady Otterbourne flushed. This young gentleman apparently knew the polite art of being inde-

finably rude, and she regretted she had not received him more cordially.

"Please take a seat, Mr. Samuelson," she said. "I sent for—I asked you to come in order that I might renew my bill. Also I am in need of a further loan."

Mr. Samuelson took out of his breastpocket a neat green morocco notebook, bound in silver, with a silver monogram on it.

"I have made a memorandum of your ladyship's obligations to us," he said, "since I supposed that your sending for me implied that you wished at least to renew. In fact, that is why I am a few minutes late."

"I wish for a further loan as well," said Lady Otterbourne.

Mr. Samuelson added up some figures with much composure.

"The debt a year ago was £12,000," he said. "Since then you have renewed it for two periods of six months, the interest for the second of which renewals has not yet been paid. Consequently," and again he paused, regarding Lady Otterbourne no more than he would have regarded a stuffed animal,—"consequently you are now in our debt to the amount of £15,600."

"I have no doubt that is the case," said she.

"I have had the honor to inform your ladyship that it is so," said he. "You will find that 60 per cent. on £12,000 for six months makes £3,600, or

in all £15,600. My father is away, as I told you, and I am in a little difficulty. From a few words he happened to drop to me on the subject, I gathered that he did not intend to grant your ladyship a renewal till the arrears of interest, at any rate, were paid up. And I hardly like to take the responsibility on myself, the sum for which you are indebted to us being so considerable."

And Mr. Samuelson adjusted the elastic band round his green morocco notebook with imperturbable precision, and put it back in the pocket of his grey frock-coat.

"What do you propose to do?" asked Lady Otterbourne, rising and standing at her full height, but with a perceptible tremor in her voice.

"I am not aware that I said I proposed to do anything," said Mr. Samuelson.

"I cannot pay you at present," said she.

Mr. Samuelson coughed discreetly behind his hand.

"The usual course is to take steps to recover the debt," he said.

There was a pause, during which Lady Otterbourne heard the fretful ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece, but before long Mr. Samuelson continued.

"Your ladyship said you could not pay at present," he remarked. "Is there, then, any likelihood of your being able to pay in the near future?"

Lady Otterbourne met his eye for a moment, and

turned her head away, and the ghost of a smile hovered round Mr. Samuelson's clean-shaven, well-cut mouth.

"I shall, I think, for certain be able to pay you after next September," she said at length.

"Can you give me any further information?" asked Mr. Samuelson. "If"—and he laid stress on the monosyllable—"if I take the responsibility into my own hands, and let your ladyship renew, instead of adopting—adopting the usual course in such cases, can you give me reasonable grounds on which I can account to my father for my so acting?"

Lady Otterbourne again sat silent a moment.

"Yes," she said at length, "and I think you know them, do you not? You have probably heard that Lady Sybil Attwood, my daughter, is engaged to be married to Mr. Percy Gerard?"

Mr. Samuelson took his little notebook briskly out of his pocket.

"I had seen a paragraph yesterday in the papers to that effect," he said, "but one hardly likes to trust the papers, does one? Your ladyship's confirmation of it is, of course, enough. Our house will be happy to renew till—till next September, I think you said."

"The marriage takes place on the fifteenth of the month," said Lady Otterbourne. She heard herself saying the words as if they had come out of some other mouth than her own.

"Perhaps, then, it would be more convenient to you to renew till, let me say, the fifteenth of October," said Mr. Samuelson, with much tact. "Your ladyship would hardly like immediately—I am sure you understand. Shall we say October?"

Lady Otterbourne could have thrown the clock at this tactful young gentleman with pleasure; but she remembered that there would probably be more to pay than the damage done to the clock. It was quite a different matter, she found, to form privately a scheme of this kind, and to discuss the details of it with a stranger. She felt as if she was being stripped of her clothes in public.

"The fifteenth of October would be more convenient," she said, "for—for several reasons. I should also, as I told you, be much obliged if you could make me another loan."

"How much would you require?"

"Three thousand pounds."

Mr. Samuelson with his head a little on one side went through a short mental calculation, tapping his gold pencil-case between his half-closed teeth; Lady Otterbourne noticed that they were remarkably white and even.

"I am afraid I hardly like to take the further responsibility on myself," he said, "but I will write at once to my father about it. It is, however, better to tell you that I do not think he would make the further advance on our usual rates of interest. Your ladyship must remember that the

old debt has been running a considerable time. He might, I think, require an additional ten per cent. on the money, unless," and his eye wandered round the pretty Louis Quinze room, "unless you can give us some additional security."

Lady Otterbourne lost her temper.

"Ah, you are extortionate bloodsuckers!" she exclaimed.

Mr. Samuelson winked slightly, as people do at a sudden noise; but otherwise his *sangfroid* was undisturbed, and he flecked a speck of dust from his sleeve.

"You will do us the justice to observe that we have not as yet succeeded in sucking anything from your ladyship," he remarked, and his voice had a just audible tremor in it, as if he was suppressing a laugh.

Lady Otterbourne suddenly seemed to remember that no purpose can conceivably be served by telling money-lenders to their face that they are bloodsuckers. True, it had been a momentary gratification for her; but on the whole Mr. Samuelson's retort was far more effective than her own attack. She had, in fact, only given him an opening for a neat little piece of insolence.

"I beg your pardon, Mr. Samuelson," she said; "I forgot myself. But I have been worried and troubled of late."

"I hope from what your ladyship has said that you are nearly at the end of your trouble," said

Mr. Samuelson, with something of the air of a dentist who is stopping a painful tooth.

Lady Otterbourne could almost have laughed in the midst of her exasperation at the well-bred rudeness of the man, at his colossally impertinent tactfulness.

"I think I need not detain you any longer," she said, giving him her hand. "You will be kind enough then to send me the necessary forms for the renewal at once, and also to communicate with your father about the additional loan. I shall be in London till the end of the month. It would be convenient to hear before then."

"With the greatest pleasure," said Mr. Samuelson, rising. "Ah, will your ladyship allow me to look at this table a moment? Yes, indeed, the bronzes are most beautiful. Duveen has not got so fine a specimen. I will wish your ladyship good-morning;" and taking his hat, this polished young gentleman left the room.

Lady Otterbourne stood still where he had left her for a minute or more. She had planned to act as she had acted without any sense of shame; but hard, unprincipled and worldly as she was, the scene itself when actually on the boards had filled her with disgust of herself. The odious urbanity and the gentlemanly appearance of the younger Mr. Samuelson seemed to her an outrage. She felt that she would not have minded the scene if the other actor had been the young man's father,

who was a sleek and truckling old Jew, and wore the manner of a man receiving a favor when she came to him for money. But his son had not learned his trade: he made no pretence of considering himself honored by an interview with her; he did not allude delicately to the "transaction of last October," but stated brutal amounts in hard cash; and though she knew perfectly well that the father's servility was rank imposture, yet a little decent dissimulation was really required to carry through such raw and crude bits of bargaining—otherwise, it was like acting without any get-up in the broad eye of day.

Sybil came gracefully home to Bruton Street not long after Mr. Samuelson had gone, and found her mother upstairs in her room. She was radiant with her ride, the roads had been charming; she herself, as she knew, had been looking charming; Percy had been charming, and he was going to send her that very day a pearl necklace which had belonged to his mother.

"The pearls are enormous and very fine, Percy says," she told her mother, "and he always knows good things from bad. I have always longed to have some big pearls. Good pearls are so rare, they are worth anything. Isn't he a dear?"

Her mother did not reply, and Sybil, looking at her, saw that the effects of her interview still remained in a certain angry agitation which quivered on her face.

"What is it, mother?" she asked. "Has something disagreeable happened? Oh, I hope not; it is so tiresome when disagreeable things come and spoil all one's pleasure!"

"I have had a worrying interview on a business subject," said her mother. "Good heavens, Sybil! what an awful thing it is——" and she stopped.

Sybil glanced quickly at her mother with a little sideway movement of he head.

"About business? Does that mean money?"

"Yes, money, if you wish to know. Also, I have been made angry."

Again Sybil's face looked a little sharp and foxy.

"Well, surely money need never worry us any more," she said. "Only this morning, mother, Percy told me to tell you——"

Lady Otterbourne had taken a piece of paper from her desk, and had begun to write a note. But at these words the crackle of her quill over the paper ceased suddenly, and her hand stayed over an unfinished word.

"Percy told me to tell you that he claimed the right to relieve you of any anxieties you might have of that kind."

"How does Percy know I have anxieties of that kind?" asked Lady Otterbourne sharply.

"I am sure I can't say," returned Sybil, "but I suppose he knows, as everybody else knows, that we are not very well off. He said it all so nicely and delicately. He said it would be a real favor to

him if, when anything of that sort worried you, or if you were in want of something you couldn't get, to let him know. He would have told you himself, but he thought it would come better from me. He has very fine perceptions."

Lady Otterbourne walked to the window.

"It is quite true, Sybil," she said, "I am terribly worried about money. Yet how can I ask Percy for it? Did he seem really to expect that I should? It is a hard thing to do."

Sybil took off her gloves very slowly, wondering to herself, just as Lady Otterbourne had wondered about her as they drove from Lord's on the afternoon before, what was the use of keeping that sort of thing up.

"I suppose," said she at last, in a clear incisive voice, "that when I promised to marry Percy, neither of us considered it a disadvantage that he was rich. And when he is so amiable as to offer to relieve you of your anxieties, I cannot see rhyme or reason in hanging back. Where is the difficulty? How much money do yon want, mother? If you like, I will tell him."

Now it is a very curious and exceedingly common phenomenon that when a man, even a naturally frank man, is in debt, and is asked, with a view to their payment, what his debts are, he will not state them in full. It is hard to tell the whole against oneself, and Lady Otterbourne was wholly incapable of it. She did not consciously wish to

whitewash the situation; but though any confession was difficult, she found it much more possible to contemplate cutting a much worse figure six months hence than a very bad one to-day. She could only bring herself to mention the amount of the new loan she wished to obtain from Samuelson's house, hoping that it would not occur to Percy that she was in debt, but merely that she wanted the cash. To tell him that she was in the hands of money-lenders, to be frank about the whole thing, she could not face. Yet, even while she purposely kept back the greater part of her debt, she knew that to act thus was only to go to Percy again; but tell the whole she could not.

"Three thousand pounds," she said, "would relieve me of all anxiety."

Sybil opened her eyes very wide; had it been ladylike she would have whistled, and words cannot say how intensely irritating her mother found that little gesture.

"That sounds an awful lot," said she. Then, with a laugh in which there was no merriment, "How lucky that Percy is very rich!"

Lady Otterbourne was silent. Sybil seemed to wish to parade Percy as her property, to make herself conspicuously the channel through which came the gift to her mother, and such an attitude was intolerably galling to Lady Otterbourne. But her pride was worsted by the prospect of even partial relief, and she said nothing till Sybil spoke again.

"Well, it can't be helped," she said. "I will certainly ask Percy; and he is such a dear, generous darling, that I am sure he won't mind. I wonder if those pearls have come yet."

Percy came to lunch at Bruton Street, and Sybil made up her mind to ask him as soon as they were alone afterwards. He brought with him the pearls he had promised her, and they more than fulfilled her expectations. It was the prettiest thing in the world to see her pleasure in, her worship even of the beautiful lustrous things. There were two rows of them, most carefully chosen, and all with that wonderful sheen in them that makes them look as if they were lit from within—a mark, as Sybil knew, of the finest pearls; and she noticed with rapture that they were all of the same size, and did not tail off into mere peas, still less mere grains, behind the neck. Pearls suited her dark beauty to admiration, and the most notorious cynic could not have doubted the sincerity of her gratitude for the glorious bauble.

An engagement called Lady Otterbourne away soon after lunch, and the two young people sat together in Sybil's own little sitting-room at the top of the house, talking of a thousand things, the girl still holding the pearls in her hand and touching them in turn softly and lovingly with her cool finger-tips.

"I like pearls better than anything, Percy," she said, "they are so *sympathique*. The more you

wear them, the more you touch them, the better it is for them. I like to think they get to know and delight in one's touch."

"Your pearls are very lucky, Sybil," said he, and she smiled her answer to him.

But by degrees Sybil grew a little silent, and Percy asked her what was on her mind.

"Do you remember what you said to me this morning about mother?" she asked.

"Surely. Have you been good, for once, and not forgotten to ask her? Do you mean to tell me you have really so far forgotten yourself as to remember something?"

Sybil smiled.

"You are too foolish," she said; "as if I ever forget anything you tell me! Anyhow, I remembered this. She is worried about money."

"I am delighted to hear it," said Percy. "At least, you see what I mean?"

Sybil gave him a little quick, trembling kiss.

"You are very generous," she said. "But it is such an awful lot, I hardly like to ask you?"

"You promised," said Percy.

"Well, she said that three thousand pounds would relieve her of all anxiety."

Percy laughed.

"How terrible!" he said. "How truly terrible! How shall I send it, Sybil? Perhaps it would be best to pay it into her account, and so she needn't be bothered to send me a receipt, or any horrid

thing of that sort. London and Westminster is it?"

Sybil looked at him a moment, and then suddenly seized his hand and kissed it.

"You are good, Percy. You are generous," she said. "And I love you."

"Thank you, dear, for saying that," he said quite gravely. "That is the one thing I shall never be tired of hearing, Sybil. Well, that is done with, is it not? Let's talk about something more interesting?"

"How rude you are! Isn't mother interesting?"

"We were talking about money," said he, "and money certainly is not."

Sybil looked thoughtful.

"I am not sure about that," she said.

"Well, I am. Did the new bicycle take you home nicely?"

Before leaving, he wrote a short note to Lady Otterbourne, and showed it to Sybil before he sealed it up.

"Will it do?" he asked. "I mean, does it sound sincere? God knows it is;" and she read:—

"My dear Mother,

"You have no idea how great a pleasure you have given me in letting me feel that you can trust me. I take this as a pledge that you will always do so, until I fail you. Then you shall deal with me as you will.

"Yours affectionately,

"Percy Gerard.

'P. S.—I 've paid the cheque into your account at the London and Westminster Bank, so you needn't be bothered with sending me a receipt."

Sybil read it through, and when she gave it back to him her eyes were dim.

" Yes, it will certainly do, Percy," she said.

CHAPTER V.

Abbotsworthy.

SYBIL and Percy had arranged to go down some day before the end of July to see their future country house at Abbotsworthy. The Americans, to whom it had been let for all these years, were in London for the season; and they left Waterloo early one morning, so as to be able to spend the inside of the day at the place, where they would see how much painting and carpeting had to be done before they came into it in the autumn; and Sybil would choose her rooms. They were to get back in time for dinner, and were going to a dance afterwards. Blanche Stoakley, at Sybil's particular request, came with them. Sybil had struck up a somewhat intimate acquaintance with her, since her engagement to Percy; though how far Blanche responded, owing to her personal liking for the other, and how much of her friendship was a toll of loyalty paid on account of Percy, is uncertain. Her loyalty, in any case, was of a convincing order, and Percy felt a particular pleasure in seeing the attachment between the girl he loved and the girl he so much liked.

It was one of those mornings when Nature seems to be making a really serious effort to be pleasant,

and on such occasions how admirably she succeeds? No one, as has been truly remarked, can be so pleasant as Nature when she chooses to exert herself. Even over London the air was almost clear, and the slight thickening of the atmosphere was in her hands but a medium for subtleties of colour and tone. The haze which never quite leaves our streets was thin and opalescent, a veil of half tints, and full of the hints and suggestions and deliberate sobriety of impressionist art. There is no city in the world so wonderfully "composed" as London, and as Percy drove to Waterloo he saw right and left a unique gallery of modern pictures by artists familiar to him. On certain days, as we all know, Nature manifests herself as a painter of the early English school; on others, of the Dutch; occasionally, even, she is Venetian or Florentine. But to-day she was emphatically modern and French, an apotheosis of the Caillebotte collection. Hyde Park Corner was an unquestionable Claude Monet, the Green Park a fine Rodin, Trafalgar Square with the National Gallery standing quivering behind the fountain was a Renoir, and a whole mile of Whistlers extended down the Embankment. The completeness of the happiness which Sybil had awakened in him was far from rendering him impercipient of all but Sybil; rather his love seemed to have quickened all the nerves and senses of his body: the beauty of all he saw was more vividly perceived; colour had grown more exquisite since

he had known Sybil; music had gained in harmony; and the world had been flushed with new and unknown loveliness. For his was one of those natures to which happiness and perception of beauty come together as a birthright; each fed and ministered to the other, and the one's gain was the gain of the other also.

Blanche had already arrived at Waterloo when he drove up, and Sybil's hansom came a minute or so later. They had, of course, the usual difficulty in finding from which platform their train started, and the feverish, over-driven porters as usual, exhibited a perfectly unassumed, but baffling, ignorance of this important point; but as the train (also as usual) was late in starting, they found it before it left the station with the reluctance of a child who is made to bathe in the sea on a cold day and is dragged there only after immense shrieking and backing away.

The train, after throwing the suburbs and the hideous backs of semi-detached houses over its shoulder, ran through a delectable land. The fields and inimitable trees of England, a combination not elsewhere to be seen on the planet, lay on either hand. For a brief space the river-side kept them company on the left, and they caught a flying glimpse of that beautiful red brick tower where Wolsey lived after his butcher's block had grown tall enough to lift him to the level of the throne, and from where he wrote so bitterly of the miasma

from the low-lying fields. Woking was a sandy streak, the Fleet ponds a silver splash, and they stayed to draw breath at Basingstoke. Thereafter they went more slowly, passing into a hilly country of chalk, stopped again for no conceivable reason at a sad and solitary cowshed called Micheldever, and drew up at the end of their journey at Royal Winchester.

Over this town there lies pre-eminent the charm of Gothic and ancient things. Every other house is a leaf from a mediæval chronicle, and the cathedral and college are chapters complete. Percy had been there at school, and as he again entered his charmed land forgotten phrases sprang to his tongue, unintelligible in themselves, and not rendered more comprehensive to Blanche and Sybil by his explanation that they were "notions."

They lunched in the town at the George Hotel, and spent half-an-hour, while it was getting ready, in driving about the city, strolling through the Close under the immemorial elms, and hanging a minute on the mill bridge to watch a mighty trout feeding. Afterwards they set out for Abbotsworthy, two miles off. The house stood on a hill, and crowned the valley of the Itchen. Two red-brick towers enclosed a gateway, and entering they drove up an immense gravel sweep to the front door. A short flight of steps led to the lower corridor, which ran the length of the house, and Sybil stopped astounded at the magnificence which should be

hers. The corridor was some hundred and fifty feet long, and hung from end to end with Gobelin tapestry. At wide intervals doors opened into the reception rooms of the house, and at the far end ran another corridor at right angles leading to the great dining hall. Before one of these doors Percy stopped.

"It was my mother's room, darling," he said to Sybil, "and please God it shall be yours. Let us go in together."

The reception-rooms, two drawing-rooms, a smaller cabinet, the room of Percy's mother, and the library looked out across the garden to the water meadows of the Itchen. Sybil had no great love for the beauties of Nature, but even she stopped with a quick-drawn breath and an explanation of delight at the view. Meadow stretched below flower-studded meadow; the clear, swift stream lay in curves and loops beyond; and the great chalk downs, still green and unscorched, rose shoulder over shoulder on the far side in massive and melting undulations. To the right, in a hollow of the valley, lay the spires and roofs of Winchester, with the bloom of a plum on them, and for the foreground myriad-coloured flower beds bounded the spaces of green, close-shaven lawn. Over all lay the flood of brilliant sunshine, vivifying and caressing all it touched, temperate and unstinted. The whole scene was large and generous, and English to the core.

To Percy it was an indescribable pleasure to see his old home again. The trail of the invaders was not over it; for the present tenants were in London, and they had had the good taste not to alter any of the existing decoration. The house had been completely done up when old Mr. Gerard purchased it, and the rooms were still painted in the colours Percy remembered, though faded now and requiring renewal; the same pictures hung in the same places on the wall—he might have been only a day or two absent. Things, of course, looked smaller to his adult eyes, but the rooms were so large and so finely proportioned that even the remembrances of the scale of childhood could not much dwarf them. The charm of fresh recognition was his too: the little high chair which he used to occupy when he came downstairs to sit by the dinner-table while the elders dined was still in its place by the mahogany sideboard; here was the table in his mother's room at which he used to learn his reading-lesson, and there the gong which he used sometimes to be allowed by the butler to sound for lunch. This had always seemed to him an act of truly magnificent generosity, and he had often felt shy of asking such a favour, for the sacrifice of letting another sound the gong when one could keep that immense privilege for oneself was not a thing to suggest too often. But Sybil, as Blanche saw to her secret impatience and disapproval, gave but half an ear and a watery attention to these reminiscences; and while Percy

was telling her of some childish escapade the remembrance of which the sight of staircase or hall called up in his mind, her eye would stray to other things and she would but answer him with a question as to a picture or a piece of furniture. The valuable and beautiful things in the place interested her far more in the light of themselves than as the scenery of Percy's childhood, and it was only because the Gobelin tapestry was so fine that she appreciated the tragedy of the moment when Percy, as a small boy, had spilled an ink-bottle over the lower border. Blanche did her best to cover this want of sympathy by her own attention; but Percy could scarcely fail, she thought, to be conscious of Sybil's indifference, and more than once, it seemed to her, he looked a trifle hurt and broke off in the middle of his story.

But Sybil was not slow, and perceiving before long that to appear interested in what he was calling up of his childhood was clearly to be expected of her, she changed her behaviour, though to Blanche's eye with a palpable effort, and asked strings of questions.

"And what splendid banisters!" she cried. "Oh, Percy, I am sure you often slid down them when you were a child; and, look, there is a knob at the end to stop you coming a bump! At Otterbourne there is no knob, and so one of us had to stop at the bottom and break the fall of the next. But these are heavenly. I should like to slide down now. How lovely the river looks from the window! Did

you often fish there? Yes? And they are carrying the hay in the meadow beyond! How very late, is it not? But we have had such a wet summer. Percy, why didn't we come down in our oldest clothes, and go and roll in the hay? There is nothing so delicious, except that sharp ends get down one's neck; but I simply dare not face my maid if I rolled in the frock I have got on. I should never hear the end of it; she bullies me frightfully. Oh, look, they are taking out tea on to the lawn, under that splendid cedar! Let's have tea at once; I am so hungry; and then we can go for another turn about the house before we need drive back to Winchester. I wish we were to stop down here for to-night, but I suppose we must get back for the Blackburns' ball."

Sybil made tea for them with the most charming grace in the world, taking her place for the first time here as mistress of the house. But they had hardly begun, when Percy jumped hastily up with an exclamation and ran across the lawn back to the steps leading into the house. Standing at the door into the garden was the figure of a very old woman in a black dress, with a white cap on her head, but as upright as a girl, and with an air extraordinarily dignified. With a ringing cry, he caught her and kissed her upon both cheeks, and plunged into a torrent of talk. Sybil looked slightly annoyed, and turned to Blanche.

"It is his old nurse, I suppose," she said. "He

told me she was still here. But what a very odd way to behave!"

Blanche flushed.

"I think it is delightful of him," she said. "She nursed Percy's father when he was a baby, and has lived with them ever since. Look, he is bringing her here. I am so glad. Oh, Sybil, what a dear old face she has!"

The faces of very old people are almost always very beautiful to look on. Years for the most part, whatever cynics and other silly people may say, bring tranquillity, and tranquillity is worth a score of Grecian noses. Blessington's face was one of these, and though a sculptor could scarcely have made a beautiful rendering of it, it would have given a painter a fine opportunity. The deepest wrinkles on her face did not tell of anxiety or trouble, but only of the gentle inevitable passage of happy years. The habit of patience looked peacefully out of her brown eyes, and her mouth though fallen away and toothless was set in an expression of exquisite content. Blanche felt herself smiling as she looked at her, and from her to Percy's face, full of tender solicitude as he led her up to the tea-table.

"Sybil dear," he said, "this is Blessington, who always used to make me take off my wet boots, and get in before it was dark for fear a gypsy should run away with me. And here is Miss Blanche, Blessington; and you shall sit down and make tea for us all, just as you always used to."

Sybil merely bowed to the old lady and took another place with a somewhat reserved air, and a manner as of gathering her skirts up; but Blanche got up and shook hands in answer to the old lady's courtesy.

"Eh, Master Percy," she said, "it's a many years since I poured out tea for you; but I don't forget. You always took three lumps of sugar and made me put in the cream before I poured in the tea."

Percy laughed.

"You are quite right, Blessington," he said, "but I have changed. I don't take sugar now; but the rule about the cream still holds good."

Blessington smiled at him with an air of indulgence.

"Eh, you've been a good boy to-day," she said, "You may have your three lumps."

And she dropped the three largest lumps she could find one by one into his cup.

"This lady didn't know how to make your tea," she said, looking beamingly at Sybil. "I can see from it that the cream was put in after the tea. It never mixes so well, made like that."

Sybil merely raised her eyebrows, and did not take the trouble to reply, but Percy answered.

"She will have to learn, then, Blessington," he cried, "for she will pour out tea for me, I hope, many hundred times!"

The old nurse beamed again; she had evidently not grasped the position before.

"But what a proud old woman I am this evening," she said, "to pour out tea again for Master Percy, and for the lady who is to be his wife. Bless you, my dear," she said, "and bless you, too, Miss! Why, it seems only yesterday that I had to scold Master Percy for taking such notice of the gardener's daughter, and he only nine years old, if he was that!"

Sybil suddenly burst out into a peal of laughter.

"Oh, Percy," she said, "how little we know of each other! I had no idea your tastes ran in such directions," and she laughed again.

Blessington for a moment was delighted with the brilliant success of her little joke; but as Sybil broke out laughing for the second time, she looked a little puzzled, and her laughter died, and she filled up the teapot again with a face that did not smile. But she was almost less at a loss than Percy, and he looked at Sybil with blank amazement.

"Oh, I am not jealous," she went on, in a cool slow voice, "but really until this moment I thought you were a little too good, dear; and it is so nice to find a weak place. Now, at any rate, I have a handle against you. If you ever displease me or fail to do exactly as I wish, I shall make further enquiries from your nurse about the gardener's daughter."

"You may make what enquiries you will, miss," said Blessington with a sudden protective instinct, "and you will find no one who will tell you aught

but good about Master Percy. And now, Master Percy, with your leave, I will go to my own tea. I've filled the teapot up and there's another good cup for everybody."

"Oh, don't go, Blessington!" cried Percy. "Why, you've only been here ten minutes."

"My tea will be waiting," said Blessington, with dignity, "and the others will be wondering where I am."

And she got up and walked across the lawn to the house. Once she looked back, but Percy was sitting with his back to her; her thin wrinkled hands made one sudden, quick movement towards each other, and she disappeared into the door leading to the basement.

The three sat in silence for a moment, and Percy felt that Sybil had behaved altogether unfitly. What could have been easier than, by a few kindly words, to have made his old nurse happier than a hundred pounds would have made her? What could have been more uncalled for than such a piece of chaff about the gardener's daughter?—harmless enough in itself, but so certain to be misunderstood by the dear simple old lady. For the moment he was, though half unconsciously, really troubled. The essence of good breeding was, surely, to behave nicely to one's inferiors. He could not bear people not to show kindness and courtesy to servants; and of all people in this world who had a right to expect all that was gentle from

him and his, Blessington, with her sixty years of service to his father and himself, was among the first. His innate gentleness of nature revolted from all discourtesy, and it seemed to him that discourtesy was quite unpardonable when directed at his old servant. Service and age above all things commanded respect from masters and from the young. Sybil, for her part, was radically in discord: she did not like old people; and she regarded servants as more or less useful machines, and the fact that Blessington had been Percy's servant did not entitle her to kindness or consideration. To her inferiors she recognized no duty, to her equals she recognized merely the manner that enabled one to live in peace and quietness. The amenities and courtesy of her character she devoted exclusively to her superiors, those in fact who could be of use to her in some way. Moreover, she considered that the poor old lady had put herself out of her place. Who cared whether Percy had three lumps of sugar in his tea or not? And it was annoying to be turned out of one's seat for a housekeeper, and to be told that one had not made tea in the best possible manner.

But it was not in the nature of things that Percy's dissatisfaction with the adored could last above a moment, nor indeed that the adored could fail to see that he had been dissatisfied. The beautiful, splendid house over which she would so soon be mistress had, in a way, gone to her head. She had

been too intoxicated to be cautious, too elated to remember to be sympathetic; and again, as when Percy told the stories of his childhood, she perceived and rectified her error.

"What a dear, queer old woman!" she cried when Blessington was out of earshot—"a sort of old fairy godmother. And what beautiful white hair, Percy! Why did you never tell me who was the real châtelaine of your house? I am sure she must regard me as a horrid supplanter of her rights, but I shall not allow her to dislike me. I shall make her fall in love with me, and we will rule together and devote all our time and energy to taking care of our Master Percy. Some more tea, dear? Three lumps or none? I shall install myself again. But wasn't the old lady quick? She snapped me up in a moment when I alluded to the gardener's daughter. Oh, Percy, I hope your wife will ever be as jealous for your good reputation! But I start under a terrible handicap."

Percy's brow cleared, and that infinitesimal moment in which he had found Sybil wanting vanished from his mind. She had merely been a little thoughtless, not grasping at once what were Blessington's claims on her courtesy; she had shown no unkindness or ill-breeding, and while her eyes laughed and danced at him he could not judge her.

"Yes, give me another cup, Sybil," he said. "Ah, I am so happy to be here again; and next

time I come here," he added in a lower voice, "I shall be even happier."

So from the two the cloud cleared. But Blanche's vision, where Sybil was concerned, was not blinded, and she saw that for the moment Percy had been seriously vexed and that Sybil had disappointed him. She saw, too, that Sybil, though in a matter of infinitesimal moment indeed, had betrayed a radical defect.

After tea they went back to the house again, and among other rooms visited the great kitchen which had once been the chapel of the Abbotsworthy monastery church. It was vaulted in the fan-shaped style, and the groining of the arches rose from queer grotesques at the juncture of wall and pointed ceiling; and here and there were angels' heads, still retaining some remnants of paint. Percy mentioned a scheme which he had in his mind of building out a new kitchen and restoring this room to its old uses, or at any rate leaving it empty, but Sybil did not sympathize.

"It would be terribly expensive," she said; "and, oh, Percy, think how cold it would be! If I were you, I would begin by redecorating the drawing-room. That is far more needed."

A few doors from this, down the basement corridor, was Blessington's room, and as there was some fine linen-pattern panelling to be seen there, they went in. The old lady was sitting by the window

doing some plain sewing, and she got up and courtesied as they entered.

Sybil, remembering the shade of annoyance which had crossed Percy's face at tea, at once laid herself out to be gracious.

"We have come to see your beautiful room, Mrs. Blessington," she said. "No, no; you shall sit down," and she gently pushed the old lady back into her chair, "and never again must you treat me with ceremony. Percy and I are your children. Yes, indeed, the panelling is splendid. And is this where Percy used to have his tea with you when he was a little boy? We must have some great talks when I come down here in the autumn, Mrs. Blessington, and you shall tell me all about the naughty things he did when he was small. Do you hear, Percy? Blessington is going to tell me tales of the mischief you used to get into, and I shall tell her tales of the unkind and naughty things you do now to me. So we shall have plenty to talk about. This shall be my ark of refuge. When you are cross to me I shall always come here."

Blessington was mollified at once.

"Eh, my lady," she said, "I like talking over all Master Percy used to do. It seems to bring back the old times!"

Sybil smiled with the most winning graciousness.

"And there will be pleasant new times for you again, I hope," she said; "Percy and I will live here a great deal. And you will send me up to

London some of that beautiful butter we nad at tea? I never tasted such good butter. I can never eat the London butter; I am sure it is made of some horrible stuff. Well, we must be going if we are to catch our train. Good-bye, and you must promise to pour out tea for us again the very first day we are here."

Percy was charmed with Sybil's *amende;* but Blanche thought she caught a sort of triumphant glance from Sybil which seemed to say, "See how easily I make the queer old lady adore me."

It was lucky for Sybil's satisfaction with her own behaviour that she could not read Blessington's thoughts as she watched the carriage drive away.

"She's prettier than a picture," she thought; "but I wish it had been Miss Blanche."

CHAPTER VI.

Blanche's Difficulty.

PARTLY because of and partly in spite of their long intimacy, it had never occurred either to Blanche or Percy to fall in love with the other. They had known each other so long and so well that the chances of any feeling more passionate than very cordial friendship springing up at any moment between them were necessarily small. But now, after Percy's engagement to Sybil, Blanche began to find that it was one of the duties of a sister to listen to her brother's rhapsodies on the subject of the adored. Hitherto she had agreed, disagreed, or quarrelled with him on all subjects under the sun; but it was apparent at once that this subject was not to be treated as any other, but that whenever it came up it was absolutely essential to appear to agree with him fervently, to suggest even herself fresh evidences of perfection, and she found the acceptance of this part a little difficult. Frankly, she was not at all fond of Sybil, though at first she could have given no more definite reason for her want of sympathy with her than was assigned to the unpopular Dr. Fell. But by degrees her vague dislike and distrust of her took form and outline. She suspected that she was

shallow, and where Percy saw depth of feeling, Blanche saw only a pair of beautiful eyes. The shallowness she covered partly by those glances, partly by a calculating sort of sharpness, and of this she had given Blanche an excellent example in her behaviour to Blessington at tea and afterwards. What all this amounted to was, that Sybil was insincere, and once granting that, there arose the awful question, "Who was the real Sybil?" But the idea of Percy's being able to even tolerate insincerity in any one was so absurd that Blanche had to allow the possibility of two conclusions—either that she herself was radically and hopelessly at fault in her estimation of Sybil, or, what would be really tragic, that Percy was blind to her insincerity. To do Blanche justice, she longed to believe that she herself was wrong about it. Sybil's whole conduct on the day they spent at Abbotsworthy seemed to her one piece of acting, and not good acting. She was enamored of the beauty and splendour of the house,—so far her emotions had been real; her head was filled with pictures of herself entertaining great parties of smart people in those palatial rooms; all else, Percy included, was forgotten, and recalled only by an effort, and an obvious effort. She had not a grain of sentiment, so thought Blanche, in her composition, and consequently no sympathy for the sentiment shown by others. Her mind was playing a triumphal march in C major in honor of herself, and it was with a

palpable impatience that she stopped the orchestra and stumbled through a line or two of her love duet.

So far Blanche's feeling about Sybil was impersonal. She judged her, or at any rate believed she judged her, as she would have judged any one else who was indifferent to her. But at that point, out of her pity for Percy, there began to spring, all unconsciously, the first shoots of another feeling. The protective instinct which women have for men, which is no less real than that which men have for women with whom they have bonds of friendship, began to sprout in her. She would, with willingness and gratitude for the opportunity, have sacrificed herself to work the redemption of Sybil, and so to save Percy; but no one demanded or even made permissible any sacrifice. He was radiantly happy, he desired nothing more than what he had, and he poured out his happiness to her in torrents of talk of which the burden was Sybil! Sybil! Sybil!

To Blanche the burden was beginning to grow heavy. Blanche's conscience was a first-rate machine, but as yet it brought no shadow of accusation against her. She had always been fond of Percy, she was so still, and it did not occur to her that any change was taking place in the quality of her affection for him. Furthermore she was analytically inclined, and fond of the dissection of complicated feelings, and her feeling towards Sybil

was certainly complicated. Thus she let herself often dwell on the question; and the more she dwelt on it, the more it troubled her. At one time she would label her with most uncomplimentary epithets—she was insincere, her affection for Percy was an affection of a purely selfish kind, and she was a *poseuse;* at another time she tried to see her through Percy's eyes, and the insincerity was capable of being regarded as a quick sympathy, a power of throwing herself into the interests and aims of others, in particular of him—and what reason had Blanche for saying that these were not genuine? She was undeniably pretty, she was almost universally popular, and in the verdict of many there is truth. Then suddenly the balance would swing back, crash would go the unstable fabric she had raised, and Blanche would find herself saying with great conviction and perfect sincerity, "I hate her."

On one occasion, some week or so after the expedition to Abbotsworthy, Percy and she were sitting together after lunch on the balcony of the Stoakleys' drawing-room in Carlton Terrace overlooking St. James' Park. The air was heavy and thundery, a leaden sky brooded over the town, and a storm seemed imminent. In front of the remoter clouds hung others with the hard ragged edges that betoken lightning—some a dense purple-violet, others copper-colored and metallic, the gongs of thunder. Blanche had been making bitter and censorious

remarks about the uncertainty of the English climate.

"Two days ago we were all shivering," she said, "and one day we had a hailstorm. It is July, remember; and that day I wore fur, which I only wore twice last winter, and yet could not keep warm. Then within the last weeks there have been several hard frosts, some nineties in the shade; and to-day is like the Black Hole of Calcutta, with an occasional blast of Sirocco thrown in."

"That is the charm of the climate, not its defect," said Percy. "It is like a Neapolitan ice, you never know what you are coming to next, and it is all delightful."

Blanche pointed tragically to the sky, or rather to where the sky should have been.

"I see no charm in a hot grey blanket," she remarked.

"Why, it is splendid," said Percy. "Look at the gallery of effects. Look at the trees, which are hanging their leaves like rows of sick people. See how still the air is here, but over in front of Buckingham Palace there is a whirlwind; do you see the dust rising to the tops of the elms like a pillar? There, the squall has struck the water and the mirror of the reflection is shattered. Look at the Victoria tower against that copper cloud. It looks as if it was made of cast-iron. That is always the way before thunder, and so few artists understand that. They give one lightning bursting out

of swirling vapours. It is never so. Lightning comes out of hard jagged clouds through a perfectly transparent atmosphere. There are a hundred beautiful things to see. And then two days ago, when we had, as you said, a hard frost, did you ever see anything so divine as the clearness of the morning? Oh, I like variety!"

"It seems to me insincere," said Blanche, thinking of Sybil.

"That is a cruel interpretation," he said. "A person may have many moods, and yet each one is sincere. In fact, moods are a great evidence of sincerity. A man who goes through life with a hard, set face, if he is sincere, is scarcely human, and one concludes his absolute consistency is an effort. But a beautiful variety of moods is one of the chiefest charms of certain characters. Sybil, for instance—but I can't pretend to draw logical conclusions where she is concerned, for I am dazzled. However, you would not think that her religious emotions were very keen. Yet I had told her last Saturday evening that I should go to service at St. Paul's, and she said she would come with me. We had a beautiful choral communion by Wesley, and in the Gloria, when they were singing 'We praise Thee, we bless Thee,' I looked at her, and her eyes were full of tears. No doubt it was a mood; no doubt the mood passes, but while it is there, there can be no doubt of its sincerity. How impossible that she should pose, to me, too, of all people? She

has a most extraordinary power of sympathy. Do you remember how delightful she was to Blessington down at Abbotsworthy?"

"While we were having tea, do you mean?" asked Blanche, not without purpose, but wondering whether her reception of Blessington had gone from Percy's mind. But he answered at once:

"At tea? No. What happened at tea? I mean when we went to the housekeeper's room to see the linen-pattern panelling."

Blanche found it hard to be loyal at this point, but she replied bravely, though feebly:

"Yes, she has a wonderfully winning manner."

"Of course she is by herself," said Percy, "only she is the best instance I know of what I mean by saying that variety can be perfectly sincere. But there are plenty of instances."

Blanche frowned.

"But Percy," she said, "it always seems to me that manner—I am speaking quite impersonally, of course—is like style in literature. In itself it may be beautiful, but it may be very dangerous. The book itself may be poisonous, and if so the attractiveness of its style is an evil instrument. So is manner in a poisonous person."

"Oh, I disagree," said Percy. "If you read a book critically, in the only way in fact in which any work of art should be looked at, what you admire is the beauty of the presentation. Even a fine presentation of a repulsive subject is, to the

critic, perfectly without blame. All subjects are subject-matter for Art; but it requires a Flaubert to make a masterpiece out of the material of Madame Bovary. It is by style alone we should judge."

"Then apply that to people," said Blanche, "and you will get the valuable result, that as long as a man poisons his father gracefully we have no business to condemn the act. The style saves it. Oh Percy, what a fine moralist you would have made!"

Percy laughed.

"I don't say that at all," he said. "You can concern yourself either with Art or morals, but you must not mix them up. Just now we are speaking of Art, which, though it has a tremendously strict code of its own, does not recognize the Decalogue as binding on the behaviour of its subjects. Still, speaking from the moral point of view, if you insist on my weighing the Art against the other, I think there is no beauty in the style of the thing which can possibly justify poisoning one's father."

"You don't really mean that!" exclaimed Blanche.

"I do, indeed. I may be wrong; but supposing the thing is transferred, let us say, to the Stage—that is, to the realm of Art,—we do not stop to consider whether the actor could possibly have been justified in poisoning his father, we are only concerned as to whether he acted the scene well. We

accept the fact that the dramatist has a right to put a poisoner on the stage."

"Oh, Percy, you don't see what I mean!" she cried. "Let me begin at the beginning. Do you regard your fellow-creatures from an artistic or a moral point of view?"

Percy thought for a moment.

'Most people are so inartistic, that you cannot regard them from an artistic point of view at all," he said. "But very few people are so immoral that you cannot regard them from a moral point of view. So I suppose one regards one's fellow-creatures from the moral point of view."

"You are talking like a decadent or a cynic," said Blanche. "They are equally detestable."

"No, there you are wrong. Also, you are allowing yourself to speak strongly. The cynic is the lowest of God's creatures, without any question. I am not—I assert I am not—among the lowest of God's creatures; I know many lower."

"That is beside the point," said Blanche. "What you have admitted is, that you regard your fellows from a moral point of view. Then you cannot judge them as you would judge a book; style cannot save them."

"Well, if I grant that, what then?" asked Percy. "I don't see what you are driving at. Why are you falling upon me with such extraordinary vigour?"

Then like a flash it came over Blanche that

what she was driving at was Sybil. It was her style, her manner that had been in her mind—the wish to force out of Percy's own mouth, though he should not know of whom he was talking, that it had been her graciousness to Blessington, her emotion, springing from no deep feeling, which, causing her eyes to brim with tears at the Communion service, had seemed to him so convincing a proof, if proof were needed, of the courtesy and high desires of her heart. With the instantaneousness of thought she perceived this, admitted it to herself, and asked herself with swift and splendid honesty why she was so anxious to believe in Sybil's heartlessness. And in the same flash her inner consciousness proposed a reply, "Because I am jealous of her." And with that her face burned.

She turned Percy's question aside, and the talk drifted off on other topics. They were all of them —that is to say Blanche and Lady Stoakley, Lady Otterbourne, Sybil and Percy—going to Baireuth for the first cycle of the performance in the beginning of August, and Blanche wondered whether she would be wise to go. The flash of self-revelation which had just occurred had dazzled and disgusted her, and she felt that she would have to consider her actions where Percy and Sybil were concerned much more carefully for the future. A few minutes afterwards large hot rain-drops began to fall from the overcharged clouds, and Percy hur-

ried away in order to get home before the storm began. Had he known it, he had left another storm in Blanche's heart, imminent, threatening to burst.

That evening it so happened that her father and mother were both dining out, and she was left alone at home. She dined by herself, and after dinner went up to the drawing-room, threw the windows open, for it was still stifling, and, drawing her chair outside into the thick hot darkness, had an honest half-hour with herself.

She was disposed at first to treat that little inward voice which had suggested that she was jealous of Sybil, as an ignorant and impertinent bystander, the cry of a street boy; but if it was, why had she been startled? Had the accusation meant nothing at all to her, there would have been no reason in allowing for the possibility of its truth —it would have been unintelligible, a message in an unknown tongue; yet, in consequence of it, she was looking out into the darkness determined to argue the matter out, yet shrinking from it with an uncontrollable shudder. Decidedly, the suggestion had come from some part of herself, some mean and uncharitable part perhaps; but still, suggestions from any quarter ought to be given serious consideration. Supposing some other of her friends had been engaged to Sybil, would the question whether Sybil was insincere or not have appeared so vitally important to her? She knew it would not.

She leaned back in her chair, and clasped her hands behind her head. It was a favorite attitude with her, and, her body being completely at rest, she felt that her mind would move more freely.

Well, if the fact that Sybil was to marry Percy was more important than if she was to marry somebody else, where was the reason for it? Certainly because she liked Percy more than she liked anyone else; or, if not that, because he deserved a better wife than anyone else. Supposing then—to give herself every chance—that Percy was engaged, not to Sybil, but to an epitome of all the virtues, would she be satisfied? And the answer came instantly, "No! the epitome of all the virtues would be a prig."

These thoughts might be salutary, they were certainly unpleasant. The inevitable conclusion was, that she liked Percy more than she liked anybody else. And in the darkness Blanche felt the blood rush to her face, and she stood up.

"I am a wicked little fool!" she said aloud.

This point being settled, she became practical. Which was the greater evil—to avoid Percy, and thus make herself ridiculous and incomprehensible to him and to all those who knew how intimate they had been; or to put a stopper on all her internal nonsense, and continue her lines of frank comradeship towards him? She had some idea at the moment that the question was crucial, but she

decided almost without thought. It would be too absurd to appear to break with him, it was also inconceivable. Then, as her thinking was done, she went to the piano and made hay of the overture to the *Meistersingers.*

CHAPTER VII.

Parsifal.

A FORTNIGHT afterwards they left London for Baireuth. They were to stay, not at the place itself, but at the village of Fantasie, half an hour's drive off. As a party they were very typical of other parties. Lady Otterbourne went because she was tired with the London season and meant to have an idle week; Sybil, who was musical in a kind of second-hand manner and admired what she was told to admire, went because she felt she ought to go (it was so tiresome when everyone was talking about Baireuth in the autumn not to have been); Lady Stoakley went because everybody else went; while Blanche and Percy went because both of them regarded Wagner as the supreme artist of all the ages. Percy had been twice before, Blanche never, and she looked forward to it with the awe of a pilgrim going to Jerusalem. She expected a sort of revelation, and an initiation into mysteries.

They arrived at Fantasie on Saturday, and the first performance of *Parsifal* was to be on the next day. They drove into Baireuth, breathing deep of the scent of the pinewoods, and lunched there and strolled about the gardens. Before long they heard the *motif* of the first act sounded on the horns, and they went back to the theatre. Lady Otterbourne,

Sybil, and Lady Stoakley had found several people whom they knew, and they were talking and laughing together as they walked towards the theatre. Blanche and Percy strolled behind, and as they entered Blanche touched him suddenly on the arm.

"I am frightened, Percy," she said. "Supposing I am disappointed!"

He smiled.

"You will not be disappointed, Blanche," he replied.

They were among the last to enter the theatre, and almost immediately after they had got to their seats the great silence, like some flowing tide growing deeper and deeper every moment, began to fill the theatre. Blanche felt it was like diving down and down into still black waters. Gradually the house grew darker, and at the last, from the unseen orchestra, came the first notes of the prelude. After the phrase had been given out, it was again repeated, covered as with a veil by the rising arpeggios on the violins, and borne away. Again it was wailed out in the minor, and again carried off; and after a pause the Dresden "Amen" fell full and firm on the ear. Then followed the seven notes of the "Grail" *motif*, repeated and again repeated, but falling the third time into the minor. Once again the "Amen" followed, and then the armies of sound began to collect and gather; stream after stream fed the river, each whispering "The Grail," till at last the roll was complete, and the air was thick with

that one melody, rippling in the treble, marching through the middle octaves, thundered in the base, and echoed again above. Soon the probation and temptation began; broken reminiscences and half-phrases of what had been complete and established died in the air; a dozen times the violins tried to tell the story of the love-feast, but faltered and failed, and shivered into cries of wailing only half articulate. The struggle seemed hopeless; yet they struggled on, till after the darkness came day, and on the wings of the morning salvation, and at the end once more the "Amen" blessed and crowned the redeemed and ransomed.

Blanche gave one deep sigh, and half turned in her seat to Percy; she could barely see him, but from the other side she heard Sybil whisper: "Oh, Percy, isn't it pretty?" and she could just see that he did not turn his head even, or reply to her. Next moment the curtain rose.

When they came out for the hour's interval, Blanche could not speak. She only wanted to go away somewhere in the woods alone, away from Sybil's rapturous and frequently expressed pleasure in the drama.

"Oh, it was quite wonderful!" she cried enthusiastically to Percy. "And did you see the dear little bier of green leaves they made for the swan which Parsifal killed? I thought that was so sweet of them. Poor Amfortas, I was so sorry for him; and there was a wasp on Parsifal's bare arm, I

noticed, Percy, and he didn't stir a muscle; it was crawling up him from wrist to shoulder. Wasn't that extraordinary of him?"

Percy frowned; something in this speech set his teeth on edge.

"Of course Vandyk is a real artist," he said; "it would have been much more extraordinary if he had moved."

"Well, I should have screamed," said Sybil; "I can't think how he managed to keep still."

Percy did not reply, and his eyes wandered to Blanche who was sitting a little apart.

"Come, we must have dinner," he said. "Let us go to the restaurant. Well, Blanche, and did you find it disappointing?"

Blanche looked at him a moment without replying. Then, "No, I was not disappointed," she said, and the soberness of her reply pleased him.

Sybil and her mother were in the best of spirits, and girt themselves about with the atmosphere of the Savoy restaurant. The Harrogates had a table close to theirs, and they shouted a *réchauffée* of the latest gossip across to each other, and posted each other up in all that had not taken place since they saw each other last in London:

"Yes, it was really true that the Willoughby marriage was off, and was it not terrible for poor Lily? She had to send all the diamonds back; but after all it was quite her own fault, and if she would behave so stupidly, of course no man could

stand it. Why, only the other day down at Carshalton——"

Then followed a series of enigmatic allusions, and screams of laughter. Very sad, was it not? but really too funny for words. The conversation soon turned on Wagner, and Lady Harrogate said it made her feel quite uncomfortable, as if someone had been playing music in the middle of her stomach. Her party roared with laughter, and Mrs. Montgomery, who was with them, also confessed that she felt as if she had swallowed a musical-box.

They drove home in the cool of the evening to Fantasie. The Harrogates had a supper party after the opera, and persuaded Lady Otterbourne and Sybil without much difficulty to stop for an hour or two; the others went back alone. Lady Stoakley was tired, and after supper she sat with them only a few minutes, and then went off to bed, leaving the two seated in the verandah of the little house which Percy had taken for his party. For a long while they sat in silence; but each was strangely excited, and each strangely conscious of the other. Percy knew exactly how Blanche was feeling, and a fresh bond of sympathy had been created between them. Great excitement and exaltation of the senses is certainly communicated without speech, and it seemed to Blanche that it was a pity to talk; for they were sharing each other's emotion in a new and startling manner, and the knowledge that Percy and she were partners of each other's unspoken

thoughts made her thrill and tingle. But the strain of the silence grew unbearable, and soon she got up and leant on the balcony in front of where he was sitting.

"Oh, Percy!" she said, and no more.

"Yes, I know, I know," he replied, feeling also relief in speech. "It was music itself, was it not? and you have found out that hitherto you have been hearing only a translation of music. I felt it like that when I came here first; and I think each time I have heard it, I have felt it more. One is like a deaf man made to hear, and I am too happy even to cry."

"It was not only a revelation of music," said Blanche; "it was a revelation of everything, and in particular a revelation of oneself. It seemed to show me all sorts of experiences which I have lived through, but of which hitherto I have been unconscious. Once, I don't know when, I was Parsifal, once I was Kundry; I have suffered with the pain of Amfortas; I have been a knight in the worship of the Holy Grail; I have starved for the Salutation of the Lord, like Titurel; I have been Klingsor in his magic castle; I have waited for the long-delayed return of Parsifal, and one Good Friday, when the hawthorn was in bloom, he came and knelt in prayer by the spring. I was there: I saw him."

"Ah! you have felt that, too," said Percy, rising and standing by her. "More than ever to-day I have been conscious of it. Who am I? Am I Percy

Gerard? Am I one of those that we have been seeing in *Parsifal*? Indeed, I do not know."

"I cannot tell you," said she. "Oh, Percy, this won't do! Has Wagner bewitched us all? What has happened to me? Is it a trick? My nerves are all strung up tight and twanging. I am terribly excited; I could scream or burst into tears with happiness. I could paint a picture or write a poem or compose an opera. All these, and all at once, and now."

Percy laughed.

"You probably could, if it could be done in a moment. Achievement is nothing but a passionate effort. So few people achieve, simply because so few people are capable of passionate effort. If one could only keep it up! But it is not given one to live on the edge of one's limitations. Something gives way—and we collapse, like a pricked bubble. You look very tired to-night. Excitement is the most tiring thing in the world. You will probably sleep to-night as if you were dead."

"Sleep! I couldn't sleep. Why should I sleep? I want to run and howl. I have been shown a mystery; I am initiated. I have penetrated into a realm which I never dreamed of before. Sound! There is nothing in the world so marvellous!"

Percy turned suddenly and faced her.

"Blanche, I wish we had come here alone," he said. "Just you and I. Lady Otterbourne doesn't care a rap for it: and Sybil, poor darling, she tries

so hard to be appreciative, and she appreciates it all wrong. She said it was pretty! Pretty! The overture to *Parsifal* pretty! Of course I love having her here, but I would sooner be anywhere else in the world with her. Quite suddenly to-day I felt that there was a great piece of my life—a great piece of me—in which she had no share. At this moment that oppresses me terribly. Away from here I shall not remember it. But here——"

Blanche made an immense call on her loyalty. For an ignoble woman, for one who did not recognize the great, clean human distinction between what is right and what is wrong, it would have been a dangerous moment. For her it was only a difficult one. She laughed lightly and naturally.

"Happy are the couple who only are not in accord about Baireuth," she said. "But what in Heaven's name did you expect? You were wanting an impossibility. She is not musical, you must have known that."

Percy shook his head.

"It was not the music she did not appreciate," he said. "It was the—the It, the whole thing, *Parsifal* in fact. She did not know it was there. Oh, Blanche, it is so nice to be able to talk to you like this!"

Blanche felt a secret and, her conscience told her, an evil joy in finding that Percy had perceived the inability of Sybil to appreciate It. She disliked herself for being capable of such a feeling, but it

was there; she was ashamed of it, and she hugged it close. Percy had not the smallest twinge of conscience in so speaking. He might as well have felt ashamed of himself for telling Blanche that Sybil did not care about the della Robbia heads on the church of the Innocenti. At the same time he had felt acute disappointment at her criticisms on the first act. He had hoped almost against hope that it would have impressed her differently. Even if only she had said nothing he would with the utmost faith have credited her with thoughts that were too deep for words. If she had only given him a look, a pressure of the hand, a blank cheque as it were, he would have filled it up to the tune of millions. But she had been *banale;* she had singled out the wasp on Vandyk's arm, the bier of green leaves for the swan, as the subjects of her praise. They were admirable, and they had impressed her; that was good, but it was like commenting on the exquisite shape of the little toe of the Hermes of Praxiteles, on the moment of seeing the statue for the first time, when the lips should have been dumb and the eyes dim.

Neither spoke for a moment or two. Then said Percy:

"Blanche, I believe I am the happiest fellow on this earth. We are here at Baireuth, and each day, so sweet in its passing, brings me closer to September. And it makes things even completer that I have a friend like you. Ah! they are back early; I hear their wheels."

They had arranged to spend eight days at Baireuth, thus seeing the whole cycle once, and *Parsifal* twice; but next day, at lunch, both Sybil and Lady Otterbourne were eager to stay another week, if Percy would be very sweet and stop too.

They had both enjoyed their supper-party tremendously, and Lady Harrogate, who was one of those women who are really a sort of "Extra Special," with all particulars of scandalous news, had simply been too amusing for words. Her party, it appeared, was also going to stop a fortnight, and life in this dear little Bavarian village was quite charming, especially since Percy had brought an admirable cook.

"It would be so delicious to see each opera twice," said Sybil; "and if they do them as well as they did *Parsifal* yesterday, I should like to hear one every day for the rest of my life. Oh, it was *too* beautiful!" and she helped herself largely to some *pâté*.

"There is the question of tickets," said Percy. "I don't know if we can get five tickets for the next cycle, but I will enquire to-day."

"Oh, never mind if you can't," said Sybil. "In any case the Harrogates are stopping on, and they have arranged a couple of picnics next week on the days that *Tristan* and the *Meistersingers* are to be given, and mother and I thought that we would go to them."

Percy sipped his glass of wine without replying.

Sybil was not quite ingenuous, he thought. Why not have said at once, that she wished to stop on in order to go to the picnics?

"Well, let's see how we all feel about it," he said. "Which performance do you want to go to next week, Lady Otterbourne?"

"I don't want to go to any," she said, frankly. "I want to go to all this week; but next week I should like to walk in those pinewoods and go to picnics. I am perfectly straightforward. I want to stop at Baireuth, and hear no music."

"There is nothing so admirable as knowing one's mind," laughed Percy. "And you, Lady Stoakley?"

"I must go back on Monday, as I arranged," she said; "for Stoakley and I are going to stay at Carshalton before we go to Scotland, which will be on the eleventh."

"But you will leave Blanche?" said Percy.

"If Blanche wishes, and Lady Otterbourne will be so kind as to be chaperone."

"Delighted," said Lady Otterbourne.

"And you, Blanche?" asked Percy.

"I should like to stop and go to all the performances," said Blanche.

"Good. Sybil?"

"I should like to see *Parsifal* once more," said Sybil, "and—and I think *Tannhäuser* and *Lohengrin* twice. And on the other days I will go to the picnics, I think, Percy. I hear *Tristan* is so very

difficult and long, and Lady Harrogate said the *Meistersingers* was one long banging from beginning to end."

Percy smiled.

"Very good. But ask Lady Harrogate if she doesn't remember a song called the 'Preislied.' I'll see about the tickets when we go in to-day. We must start in half-an-hour."

"That is sweet of you, Percy," said Sybil. "You've no idea how I enjoyed *Parsifal.* How I look forward to next Sunday! And it is *Tannhäuser* to-day, is it not? I long to see *Tannhäuser* again; it is perfectly thrilling."

There was found to be no difficulty about getting fresh tickets, as some half-dozen had been returned at the last moment, and all but Lady Stoakley stopped on. Lady Otterbourne since Sybil's engagement had completely buried the hatchet as far as she herself was concerned; the other had failed, and she had no animosity left against the vanquished. She had also another reason for wishing to stay on, which she had mentioned as yet to nobody. Her bill with its terrific accumulation of interest fell due on the fifteenth of October, and it had been now arranged that Percy and Sybil were to leave England directly after the marriage and spend six weeks cruising in the yacht. They both loved the sea and they had planned to be away till early in November. Lady Otterbourne had rather opposed the scheme; she said it was far more sensible and

civilised to go and live in somebody else's house for a week or two, but she could not reasonably press her objections. It followed then that when once the marriage was over she would not see Percy till after her bill became due, and it was necessary somehow, since she had no means of meeting it, to make known to him her position before. Already she was disgusted at her own cowardice in not telling him all in July; and already the thought of the worst moment to come, since she had shirked the bad one then, was oppressive to her. When they left Baireuth they were all going to stay at various houses, and, much as she disliked the imminence of her confession, she realized that it was better to get it over here than to have it hanging round her neck, and perhaps run the risk of not being able to introduce the subject.

Percy, for his part, was delighted to stop. He had nothing particular to do till the middle of August, and he would have waited, if he had not been otherwise engaged, for as many cycles as possible. It was also very interesting to him psychologically to watch the effect of the dramas on Blanche. He had always known she was extremely musical, though hitherto she had not heard very much, and Baireuth seemed to have moved her to the bottom of her soul. Every day she grew more vivid; she noted fresh points of beauty and strength in the interweaving of drama, spectacle and music, and accounted for her own impressions with an ex-

traordinary reasonableness. She had an unerring instinct for what was good, but, and this is much rarer, she could say why she found it so.

She seemed, for instance, that evening after they had seen *Tannhauser*, to answer the riddle of the drama, to give a justification for what Percy, with all his love of Art and freedom from morals where Art was concerned, had always considered a difficulty.

"The whole thing is immoral in intention," he had said to her as they were driving home that evening. "For myself, as you know, I do not take the line of condemning Lady Macbeth; but, so I think, because she lives in the horror of her deed. It is not so here; Venusberg in this music is always lighthearted and beautiful. Wagner never surpassed that froth and effervescence in pure beauty; it is like sunlight striking on the fizzing pool below a waterfall, and yet I find myself saying that the thing is immoral. It is chucked at us in the most glaring and indecent juxtaposition to the 'Pilgrim's March,' which is beautiful certainly, but sombre and ascetic. I cannot help wondering which way the artist's sympathies lay, and the answer is inevitable; and in criticising a work of art, that is an absurd attitude to take."

Blanche shook her head.

"Oh, you are wrong from beginning to end, Percy," she said. "The juxtaposition is violent, I know, but it is completely strong. And oh, how

healthy real strength is! It cannot even be anything else than healthy. Strength always, always, always implies perfect health. It cannot exist without. But I do not mean by strength what horrid little men with long hair, who write bad poetry, call 'par'ful'; I mean real strength, that is the secret. Here, if you like, it is treatment only that makes the thing possible, as you said to me once in London. Think of the maudlin, sugary, how-naughty-we-are garden scene in *Faust*. That is 'par'ful' and simply disgusting. In *Tannhäuser* you have exactly the same situation. But *Tannhäuser* is healthy, bracing, what you will, because it is strongly done. Nothing is shirked, which is always a healthy thing. If you take as your subject the everlasting struggle between the higher and the lower man, state your case. It is only when you cover over a point with innuendos and phrases capable of two interpretations that the thing rots and breeds corruption!"

Blanche spoke with extraordinary vehemence, and Percy was fairly astounded by the uniformity of her view. She might be right or wrong, but certainly she was vivid.

Tristan, *Lohengrin*, and the *Meistersingers* followed during the week; and Blanche, considering she had only seen Wagner before on what she called the great comic opera stage at Covent Garden, continued to make the most surprising discoveries. About *Tristan* she would not speak, she

wished to see it again first; the *Meistersingers* she summed up in one phrase, "A five hours' farce, and all of it funny"; *Lohengrin*, though much shorter, she thought too long.

"There is something monotonous about it," she said, "and I don't know what it is. It is as endless as the songs that the jolting of the wheels of trains sing. Ah, that is exactly it. It is all written in the same time, except one, no, two numbers."

Percy referred to the score; it had never struck him before that this was the correct reason, and Blanche was found to be perfectly right.

Sybil meantime gave utterance to fresh *banalités*, but finally struck her colours after two acts of *Tristan*. She confessed to Percy that she had done her best to like it, because he liked it so much; but she had a little headache, and would not come in to the third act. She would drive back to Fantasie when they went in again. Besides, she wanted to be fresh for *Parsifal* on Sunday. Percy expressed solicitude for her headache, but acquiesced completely in her not going in for the rest of the opera. Her confession that it was too much for her, but that she had tried to be pleased for his sake, was exceedingly pleasant to him, and he put her into a carriage, but did not offer, as she had half-expected, to come with her. On her solitary drive home she felt vaguely disposed to think that Percy was a little too much interested in Blanche's opinions on Wagner; but on those occasions when

she had entered some discussion of theirs she noticed that, though he replied to her readily enough, her contributions to the conversation had the unfortunate effect of paralysing the others. Besides, it was impossible to hazard a contribution to the justification of augmented intervals when one did not know what an augmented interval was, and so for the most part she kept quiet when such subjects were in the air. She felt now and then a little out of it; but knowing, and having excellent reason to know, that Percy was completely in love with her, she agreed, sensibly enough, that his interest in Blanche was merely intellectual.

CHAPTER VIII.

Lady Otterbourne's Difficulty.

ALL through that week Lady Otterbourne's anxieties had gradually been getting insupportable, and she determined on the earliest opportunity to confide the enormity of her affairs, this time without reserve, to her future son-in-law. She was a woman of courage, and she did not as a rule flinch from a necessity, when she faced it as such, though she was often disposed to deny as long as possible that anything unpleasant was imperative. When a thing certainly had to be done, she did it, and wasted no idle and bitter reflection on the necessity. It was perfectly clear to her that this thing had to be done; otherwise there was no doubt that the house of Samuelson would, as the junior partner had so politely phrased it, "adopt the usual course," and the thought of "the usual course" made her feel cold. After they left Baireuth she could not be certain of seeing Percy again with sufficient privacy; no doubt opportunities might occur, but here he was with them all day, and as the thing had to be done, it had better be done now.

Saturday gave her the disliked and desired opportunity. There was no opera that day, and, as the weather was very hot they had decided at lunch

not to go out till tea-time, when the stress of the heat would have abated. After lunch they had all sat for a while on the verandah; but first Blanche and then Sybil had gone in, and at the end of half-an-hour Percy, in a state of extreme relaxation from heat and lunch and continued cigarettes, was left alone with Lady Otterbourne, who was doing needlework very badly. Sybil knew that needlework well; it only appeared on occasions of anxiety, and it had long been to her a sort of sign that something of extraordinary import was at hand—a kind of storm-cone. So when she rose and went into the house to write a few letters, and observed that her mother did not follow her, she concluded for certain that she had something troublesome or important to talk over with Percy.

Lady Otterbourne was not easily baffled or disheartened; but though in the course of her life she had been in some difficult places, she could not remember ever having found herself in so thoroughly unenjoyable a situation. It was only better than "the usual course." She had more than once thought of negotiating again with Percy through the medium of Sybil; but she did not wish Sybil to know the extent of her debt, nor indeed that she was applying to Percy again, and she had decided to get through her scene with him in person. To-day he was in a peculiarly relaxed and foolish mood, the effect no doubt of this emotional week succeeded by an off day. As he had told Blanche,

to live on the extremes of your limitation entails a subsequent readjustment; and the readjustment was clearly on him. At lunch he had talked the most futile and extravagant nonsense, and now he was lying at full length in a long chair, with his whole mind fixed on the blowing of one smoke ring through another—an arduous feat, for which both skill and luck are necessary.

"It hardly matters at all," he said after accomplishing this with remarkable success, "what one lays one's hand to, provided one does it with all one's might. Considered in the scale of ultimate good, the best and noblest thing which a man can do, is so infinitesimal. And the best and noblest thing has often a great deal of resultant evil in it. We are like children trying to draw a beautiful face. Behold, when it is done we find that we have made a satyr. And then we go about trying to persuade other children that it is beautiful, and for the most part we succeed. Now, there is no such objection to smoke rings. They are entirely and absolutely innocent, and of a pure and globular nature like microbes. And then if one blows smoke rings one doesn't inhale the tobacco. Also one smokes quicker, which is good for the cigarette-makers. Finally, one always thinks that one can blow a better one than one has ever yet blown, which is a fine and stimulating reflection."

Percy delivered himself of these surprising futilities with great gravity and slow enunciation. He

spoke as if nothing in life was so important. Lady Otterbourne laughed with a little nervousness, and he went on:

"To-day I have acute paralysis of the will," he said. "I have a dozen letters which simply must be answered to-morrow. I daren't think what will happen if I don't answer them. And I shall not answer one of them—not because I won't, but because I can't. If a coach and four was to drive down this verandah, do you suppose I should move out of its way? Not a bit of it. I might give one exclamation of passionate dismay, but I should not move. I would not move for the eight cream-colored horses of the Queen with their false tails."

This was worse and worse. Lady Otterbourne pricked herself violently with her needle in agitation.

"Oh, Percy!" she said, "without exception you are the happiest person I know. You are desperately interested in many things, and, to crown all, you have the power of loafing, which most energetic people lack, and which nobody can be complete without. Give me the receipt for happiness."

"To be engaged to Sybil," he replied promptly. "And to blow smoke rings."

"I can't be engaged to Sybil. Will nothing else do?"

"Yes, I suppose plenty of other things will do, until you are engaged to Sybil. Certainly I was very happy before I ever saw her. The chief of the

other things is, never to worry. *Che sara sara.* It is no use fussing and fiddling with one's destiny."

"Ah, but who shall say what is one's destiny?" asked Lady Otterbourne. "Some things seem unavoidable; but perhaps if one made sufficient effort, they would not be."

"Just now I feel inclined to say, 'Never make an effort,'" said he, "though 'Always make an effort' would be truer in most cases. What it really comes to is, 'Never make an unnecessary effort.' And never make an effort when a thing is done, never try and grab backwards; you cannot catch it: and never, oh, never, indulge in regrets. They are useless and poisonous, and most tiring. Spend your strength in making the best of what remains. So much more always remains than what has been taken from us. Dear me, I am afraid I am getting more fatuous than ever."

Lady Otterbourne put down her needlework.

"I don't find you fatuous," she said. "If you knew it, you were speaking wonderfully to the point. You are saying things which have a valuable bearing for me."

Percy threw away the end of his cigarette, and sat up. The time for smoke rings, he suspected, was over.

"You have something to tell me," he said. "What luck! I love hearing things. It is even pleasanter than saying them. But first, there is nothing wrong with Sybil?"

"Dear child, no," said Lady Otterbourne. "But —but I find it difficult to tell you. I do not find that saying this is pleasant."

"Do tell me," said Percy. "Take a long breath and tell me."

Lady Otterbourne took up her needlework again, and began to sew savagely.

"I am in great difficulties, Percy," she said, "and I ought to have told you long ago. I ought to have told you when you were so generous to me before!"

"Oh, it's only money!" said Percy, half with relief, half with disappointment in his tone.

"Ah, there you speak with the blissful ignorance," she said. "If you only knew how awful money is to those who have not got it. To have plenty, you assure me, is no pleasure; I assure you that not to have plenty is not pleasurable either. Well—when you were so generous to me I could not bring myself to tell you all."

"Why not?" asked Percy, in frank surprise.

"I don't know. I couldn't. Yet even while I was keeping something back, I knew I should have to tell you sometime."

"Promise me then one thing," said he.

"I will promise you anything."

"Promise me that you will tell me all now. Oh, my dear mother, it is of no use to—to conceal things from one who really, as you know, finds the greatest pleasure in helping you, in doing anything to make you or Sybil happier. So tell me."

"I will tell you all," she said. "Some time ago I borrowed £12,000 from a money-lender. The interest has been accumulating ever since. The debt is now £15,600—that is to say, it was in June. It has been renewed again for six months—no, not quite six, but till the middle of October."

"At what percentage?" asked Percy. He had lit another cigarette and was smoking quite contentedly.

"Sixty per cent."

"That will make it between eighteen and nineteen thousand, will it not?" he asked.

"About that."

Suddenly a distressing thought struck him. The debt was due on the 15th October—a month after the marriage. He could not help remembering that Lady Otterbourne had been incomprehensibly unwilling that they should go yachting. The thought was a nasty taste in the mouth.

"Of course it shall be paid," he said quietly, "though I cannot pay it till my birthday. But that will be on the 15th September. That is all right, then. Oh, tell me the name of the money-lender; I will pay it direct, for there is no reason why you should be mixed up in these things."

"Samuelson, of Jermyn Street," said Lady Otterbourne.

"What a greedy name! How horrid it must have been for you all this time. Oh! one more promise. I insist that you shall never refer directly

or indirectly to the matter again. If you don't say 'Yes' at once, I will buy the debt from the old Jew and sell you up myself. Quick, please, promise!"

"I promise," said Lady Otterbourne.

"On the subject of smoke rings there is much more to be said; and with your leave I will say some of it," continued Percy, without a pause. "Supposing you blew them in a temperature very greatly below zero, would the damp particles of one's breath turn them into ice? If so they would fall on one's nose, which would be very disconcerting. We should have to invent ring-blowers' nose-protectors. How lucky I am that the temperature is not below zero. Gracious, how hot it is! It's extraordinary the theatre does not get unbearable. What shall we do this evening? We might drive out after tea, and those who are energetic, of whom I am not one, could walk back. I hate driving out and walking back. What do you say?"

Lady Otterbourne looked at him a moment with something like tears in her eyes.

"Percy," she said, almost in a whisper.

"Yes," said Percy, in extremely matter-of-fact tones.

"Percy, may not I——?"

"Certainly not," said he, seeing that she could hardly speak. "You may walk or drive. That is all. I shall go in and ask Sybil what she wants to do."

And he hurried off into the house, thinking it better to leave her alone.

He found Sybil writing letters, and, after arranging with her, went to his own room. The interview with Lady Otterbourne had been harder for him than she knew. Why could she not have told him a couple of months ago about this wretched debt? Though he was generosity itself about money matters, he did not in the least care that he should be paying 60 per cent. for these months to a horrible money-lender! Perhaps he could arrange with them to pay it off in September instead of October. Why could she not have come to him, who, instead of a loan, would so willingly have made her a gift, and charged no interest? Again, do what he would, he could not help his thoughts recurring to that question of their spending the honeymoon on the yacht. Why had she not then, for the second time, have told him of her difficulties? It was impossible not to connect her objection to the yachting with that 15th October when the money became due. He hated to harbour suspicions, but in a moment suspicion had shot itself in his mind, and in the same moment was converted into certainty. Again, what he coveted from others was, to be trusted by them; and of whom had he a better right to expect confidence than of Lady Otterbourne? He felt bitter and angry and disappointed.

But soon his mood changed, and the invincible

kindness and gentleness of the man reasserted itself. He was utterly incompetent to judge, so he told himself, of the nature of such difficulties. Money had never meant anything to him; he had no experience, and therefore no knowledge, of what the want of it meant. His bitterness and anger were selfish and unworthy. Regret also, as he had told Lady Otterbourne, was an emotion not to be indulged. He would make the best of what remained, and there always remains more than has been taken. Meantime tea was ready, and Sybil was calling him.

But he could not guess how immense had been the weight which had now passed from the mind of Lady Otterbourne. Until she had this afternoon made herself secure from "the usual course" referred to by the urbane Mr. Samuelson, junior, she had not known how the uncertainties and possible exposure of the future had oppressed her. She quite realized the immense service which Percy had done her, and in a certain way she was intensely grateful. But real gratitude is of the same fine nature as passion and love, and her gratitude was different in quality. She was only grateful as the gunner who is working his battery is grateful to the earthwork in which the enemies' shot plunges, and to which he owes his life. She thought, as the gunner might think, that it would have been most terrible to have had no earthwork there, quite impossible in fact. One could never

have managed without it. But neither gunner nor Lady Otterbourne regarded their saviour with any passionate thankfulness. For one moment, it is true, when Percy cut short her attempt to thank him, she was moved and touched, but almost before he had vanished into the house she had no thoughts but those of relief at having escaped the threatened danger. She realized, however, in the back of her mind, that it was possible that he might at some future occasion be her protection again.

She did not attempt to make any further allusion on the subject to Percy, and though this was in accordance with his expressed wish and his real desire, he was surprised at it. They had a delightful drive after tea, and his future mother-in-law was in the best of spirits. She had scarcely known how heavy her load had been till it was removed.

The next afternoon they went to the second performance of *Parsifal.* Percy again sat between Sybil and Blanche, and once more the overture was to both the picture of the pure man made perfect through suffering. The "Stainless fool" shook his head to the questions of Gurnemanz; pity touched him for the death of the swan he had killed; the Grail was revealed to him; and at the suffering of Amfortas, he clutched for a moment at his heart. Percy was intolerably moved, and, with that sudden yearning for sympathy which touches us all when our finest emotions are aroused, he

turned and looked at Sybil to catch her answering glance. Her head rested on her hand, her breath came evenly, she was fast asleep.

He was terribly, unreasonably disappointed. To him his love for her had quickened and vivified all his artistic instincts, and they were a very real and integral part of him. It seemed to him for a moment that it was incredible that what touched and moved him so profoundly should have merely been a lullaby to her—should have done no more for her than a dull sermon or a heavy lunch. Yet there was no doubt of it, she was sleeping with lips a little parted, sleeping like a child. He turned quite cold at the dreadful thought that perhaps she would also snore. After a few minutes she woke, smiled at him, and whispered, "Isn't it wonderful?" and instantly fell asleep again.

For once Percy was glad when the act was over; and after dinner he strolled about with Sybil, to whom her sleep had given an excellent appetite.

"I thought Vandyk sang even better than before," she said. "Percy, it was good of you to bring us here."

Percy laughed.

"Oh, Sybil, be honest!" he cried. "You were fast asleep."

"I closed my eyes for a few minutes," said Sybil, with dignity.

"My dear child," said Percy, "you were asleep soon after Parsifal shot the swan. About the mid-

dle of the love-feast you awoke, and said to me, 'Isn't it wonderful?' and fell asleep again. Don't come into the next act, it will only bore you: and it would be dreadful if you snored."

Sybil was offended.

"And I suppose it would take away your pleasure in the music?" she said.

"Yes, it certainly would; I could hardly attend at all in the last act. Come if you wish, of course, but I don't see what object is served by your being bored."

"Or by your attention being taken off the stage," said Sybil.

Percy saw that Sybil was angry; but he felt that he was in the right, and did not see his way to alter his mind.

"I did not mean to offend you, Sybil," he said, "and really I don't see that I have been unreasonable. If you enjoy it, come by all means, of course. But why bore yourself, and sit in a hot theatre instead of in the fresh air? If it only sends you to sleep——"

"I wasn't asleep," said she.

Percy did not say any more, and they turned to go back. The others were still sitting outside the restaurant, and Sybil left Percy and sat down by Blanche. In a few minutes the second *motif* was sounded, and they all got up to go to the theatre. He saw with mixed vexation and amusement that Sybil said a word to her mother and went in first, so that she sat two paces off him.

The whole incident had been infinitesimal and ridiculous, and he felt more inclined to laugh at it than to be annoyed. There were people, he knew, who took it as a personal insult to be told they had been asleep, as if it was a disgraceful thing, and they always denied the accusation. It was surely much simpler to admit it, and in this case he really could not understand why Sybil should prefer to sit through another act and make a martyr of herself rather than acknowledge what had been so extremely evident. Out of the corner of his eye he saw, before the theatre was darkened, that she was sitting bolt upright, and that her gaze was fixed on the curtain, which had not yet gone up, as if the most stirring scene was being played upon it. Then, as the overture began, he gave himself a mental shake, annoyed with himself for being annoyed, and for the time dismissed the subject altogether.

He would not have alluded to it again at all; but at the end of the act, when they came out, Sybil approached him looking stern and judicial.

"Did I snore during the whole of the last act?" she asked, with icy propriety.

"I did not hear you," said Percy, gravely; "but, you see, you were not sitting next me."

Sybil turned from him with a petulant flutter of ribbons and laces, and said no more.

Lady Otterbourne had seen that something was wrong, and before they went in again she spoke

with great frankness and not a little hard common-sense to her daughter.

"What has happened?" she demanded abruptly.

"Percy has been very rude," she said. "He told me I went to sleep during the first act."

"So you did," said Lady Otterbourne; "I woke you myself twice. I suppose you denied it. A gratuitous fib of that kind is simply pitiable. Was that why you gave yourself absurd airs and would not sit next him during the last act? Let us have no more of such nonsense."

"It was Percy's fault," said Sybil, flushing angrily.

"Fiddlestick! Of course Percy knows you are quite unmusical; but he does not yet know, and it had better be long before he does, that you can give yourself silly airs like a school-girl. Well, Sybil, that is my opinion; but no doubt you will act as you think best."

Lady Otterbourne, having thus borne her testimony, left Sybil to digest her words as she best might. To the mouth they were bitter, but Sybil soon began to think that they were wholesome. Consequently when they went in for the third act she again sat next Percy, and, taking off her left glove, she slid her hand under cover of the darkness into his, and their reconciliation needed no words.

CHAPTER IX.

The Broken Cast.

BEFORE her engagement to Percy, Sybil Attwood had earned, perhaps unjustly, the character of being something of a flirt. But the word is an ugly one, and it would be more just to say that she fully realized that she intended to marry during the course of the next year or two, and that she was willing to give any eligible man who might present himself her polite and careful attention. There was one man in particular on whom she had bestowed a great deal of polite attention, though in justice to her, it must be said that he had bestowed quite as much on her. This was a Mr. Arthur Carnegie, an American by birth, but in most respects an Englishman. He spent several months every year in England, though he remained an American and lived the greater part of his time there. He was a young man of about thirty, extremely tolerant, immensely wealthy, and with a large fund of indomitable perseverance. In a quiet, unobtrusive manner he had fallen in love with Sybil, and had not Percy Gerard carried all before him in his impetuous, rapid courtship, it seemed very likely that Sybil's fate would have taken her across the Atlantic. There were, however, two objections to him: the

first, that he spent so much of his time in his native country; the second, that he was liable to allude without shame or warning to the origin of his fortune, which was enormous. But the origin of it was pig, neither more nor less, and he said so.

He was a man of few words, and he appeared to take his ill-success in the matter of his marriage with calmness. He wrote Sybil a delightful letter of congratulation, and told Percy, with whom he was slightly acquainted, that he was a lucky dog. What he did not envy him was his mother-in-law; for that lady, he considered, had led him on in an unwarrantable manner, and had cast him off again with almost disconcerting composure. Sybil, he confessed to himself, he thought had led him on too; but being naturally modest, he was willing to put this down to his own conceit.

On the subject of Lady Otterbourne his resentment was perfectly justified. Barring the two disadvantages mentioned above, she thought he would make an admirable husband, and up till the day that Percy had proposed and been accepted she had kept him on hand. But then he got his dismissal at once. Percy was distinctly the superior article, and Mr. Carnegie, for all she cared, might go and fill himself with the husks that his own pigs ate.

It was a little annoying to Sybil to find that the rejected one was among the party staying at the Montgomerys', with whom they spent a week after their return from Baireuth; and it was even more

annoying to find that he treated her with the utmost indifference. He was as evenly polite as ever, but he showed no signs of agitation or disquiet. Percy was there as well, but the two seemed excellent friends; and Sybil thought, discontentedly, that there was no romance in life.

There were only a few people in the house: Ernest Fellowes, Percy's journalistic friend, was there; otherwise Lady Otterbourne, Sybil, and Percy completed the party. Mrs. Montgomery, it is true, counted for two; but her husband, on the other hand, counted for none at all. He was a middle-aged man, with a round infantine face and grey whiskers, and was shyly grateful if any one took any notice of him, which they seldom did. Their home was a charming house close to Goring, and though partridge shooting had not then begun, there were quiet amusements to be had. A good trout-stream ran through the fields close by the house, and Percy, who included fly-fishing among the absorbing pursuits of the world, found plenty of entertainment. He found a fellow-enthusiast in Carnegie, and the two spent some hours every day in matching their wits against the shining fish. Sybil would often go with them, cherishing a sort of grudge against Percy for fishing. She thought in a vague fretful way that he ought somehow, though she could not have suggested how, to be devoting himself to her more completely.

Percy would take one side of the stream, Carnegie

the other; and sometimes, from a sort of childish perversity, in the unformulated hope of recovering Percy from the fish, Sybil would attach herself to the other. In this she signally failed; for while he was fishing, Percy was sublimely unconscious of the behaviour of anything in this world except that of the trout, just as when he was listening to music the rest of the universe was a thing of smaller moment than the orchestra. Carnegie also seemed to pay no more attention to her than he would to a tree, or a flower in the grass.

On one of these days they fished the stream several miles higher up, where it was smaller and harder of access, driving out and taking lunch with them. Sybil again had joined their expedition, and she was unpacking the hamper for lunch under a tree some twenty yards away from the stream, as the two young men made a few final casts till it was ready. They had had but little sport in the morning, and they were both anxious to have something better to show before they stopped for lunch.

Sybil had not brought a knife, and she was getting rather impatient over the string of the hamper, which was in a hard knot. She had called to Percy once to come and help her, but he had only said:

"Don't bother about it. I will just fish up to the bend, and then I'll do it for you."

In consequence she was feeling a little neglected, but determined to be severely magnanimous and get it done before he came.

There was a good pool just above where Percy was fishing, and in a minute or two he was up to it. Right in the middle a trout was feeding with the earnestness that the dry-fly fisher loves to see. Three flies, one after the other, floated down over him, and he snapped them all up; and, with his heart in his mouth, Percy cast over him. He rose at the fly, but missed it altogether, and he cast again. This time he was fast in him; his rod bent to a delicious curve under the rush of the fish, and his line screamed out. The gates of heaven were unbarring, for he was certainly a heavy fish.

Below the pool stretched a reach of shallow water covered with strong sappy weeds, and it was there, as Percy saw, that his danger lay. Once among them the chances were a hundred to one in favour of the fish; at all cost, then, he must be kept out of them. He was dashing wildly about the pool, and once he jumped clean out of the water. In the momentary glimpse which Percy caught of him, he put him down as not an ounce under three pounds. After a few minutes he began to tire, and, though he was perilously near the tail of the pool, Percy began to count him as landed.

At that most critical of all moments, a wailing cry came from Sybil.

"Oh, Percy, do come!" she cried.

Percy turned round for one second, startled at the dismay in her voice; his line slackened for a moment, and instantly the trout was among the reeds.

The heart-breaking disaster came soon, and the breeze dangled his flyless cast in the air.

He swore once quietly and regretfully, and laid down his rod on the bank.

"Lost him?" asked Carnegie, who had reeled in and was watching.

"Yes."

"Bad luck. Got in the reeds, eh?"

Again Sybil called.

"Oh, Percy, are you coming?" she cried.

"What is the matter, Sybil?" he asked. "Have you hurt yourself?"

"No; but I can't untie this string. Do come and help me."

Percy stood stock still a moment.

"Is that all?" he asked. "You have lost me the heaviest fish I have seen this year."

"What nonsense!" said Sybil. "How did I lose you your fish?"

Percy made a grab after his retreating temper and recaptured it.

"Never mind, dear," he said. "You couldn't know; but you called me just at a critical moment, and I turned round, giving him a slack line. Didn't he make for the reeds!"

"He must have been badly hooked then," said Sybil. "And I can't untie this string."

Carnegie was some way off on his way to the bridge, by which he would cross in order to join them, and was out of earshot.

"You don't understand," said Percy. "It was no question of the hook. He carried off the whole fly."

Sybil pushed the hamper from her; she was in exactly that mood which, when it appears in small children, is called fractiousness.

"What do I care about your tiresome fish?" she cried. "Here I've been half-an-hour breaking my nails over the thing, and then all you do is to blame me for losing your fish."

Percy looked at her in surprise.

"What is the matter?" he asked. "I didn't blame you; I said you couldn't have known. Here, let's have a try at that string. By Jove! it is in a knot; my knife will do it. That is the best rule: never untie a string if you can cut it."

To do Percy justice, it must be said that he behaved like an angel. Once granted that a man thinks it worth while to fish at all, it can never be a trifle to him to lose a heavy fish; and were he Leander himself the thought that anyone, be she who she may, has been the cause of it, and that on account of a string which would not come untied, must for a moment seem a bitter thing. But he said not a word more, cut the offending string and unpacked the hamper with the most cheerful alacrity. Just then Carnegie came up.

"He looked a heavy fish," he said. "How did you manage to let him go among the reeds? I should have thought you would have landed him at once. He seemed played out.'

Sybil interrupted indignantly.

"He says it was my fault, Mr. Carnegie!" she cried. "As if it could be my fault, when I was sitting here! I just called him, and he looked round and the fish was off."

"It was his fault then," he said. "He should not have looked round or paid you the smallest attention just then. If Queen Victoria asked me to come and see her when I had a big fish on, Her Majesty would have to wait."

Percy frowned.

"Oh, well, the fish is gone," he said. "He was a big one, though! Biggest I've seen yet, I soberly believe, though the fish one loses always are the biggest."

Sybil was wise enough to say no more, and the soothing influence of food had its legitimate effect. She had a shallow nature, which soon got rough under a squall and was quickly calmed down again, and in a few minutes, apart from the little resentment she still felt against Percy, still believing him to have been completely in the wrong, she had quite recovered herself.

They had found a delightful spot for their lunch, of the sort of which there are so many hundreds in England and so few anywhere else. They sat under a willow in a long-grassed field, at the end of which flowed the stream they had been fishing. Beyond, a long slope of meadow land, with tall copses planted here and there, ran down to the

side of the Thames, which glimmered faintly beneath the beech-woods of Cliveden opposite. Dykes were cut at intervals in the fields, and these were full of burdock and the pink spires of willow-herb. Little blue forget-me-nots crouched in the long grasses by the brink of the stream, each a reflection of the sky, and trembled on the edge of the water, as if longing and fearing to take the plunge. A lark, an invisible speck against the cloud-flecked luminous dome of heaven, carolled somewhere in the infinity above their heads, and from the road to Pangbourne, which lay below them, they heard the cheerful whistling of some boy trimming the hedges or driving his flock of sheep. The hundred unnoticed noises which go to make up the quiet of the country were in their ears, and in their nostrils the myriad smells of green and growing things. The stream, which ran in a sudden elbow close to them, trotted bright and sparkling over its pebbly bed; and here and there grew clumps of the reeds which had been fatal to Percy, some bent double like a bow in the water, some standing upright and quivering with the suck of the current, others making strange twitching movements backwards or forwards as if some subaqueous animal was gnawing at them. The sun, which for an hour or two in the morning had been too strong on the waters to make fishing easy, was now veiled with thin clouds, so that it hardly cast a shadow, and the tempered light served to bring out into a subtler harmony of tint

the gamut of greens and greys which Nature has mixed in such soft proportions for the summer colouring of the inimitable Thames.

After lunch tobacco tasted sweeter than ever, and the profound animal content which is the great reward of having been out-of-doors all morning, and having lunched under a tree, descended on them. The tragedy of the lost trout had spent its bitterness, or rather it could find no fodder in Percy's pleasant soul to feed itself on, and died of inanition, and as he helped Sybil to pack the hamper again with the utensils of food, he pronounced the world very good. The afternoon too promised to provide all the circumstances which lead to full creel, for the sun was now entirely concealed, and a light breeze ruffled the smoother places.

"And what is to be the fate of the luncheon basket?" asked Percy when it was ready.

"We are to leave it at that farmhouse. They will call for it," said Sybil.

"And you?"

"I shall walk home," she said, "I shall like the walk, and it is only a mile or two. Will you come with me, Percy?"

Involuntarily Percy's face fell. He was out for a day's fishing. The morning had been sunny, but the afternoon promised perfection, and the trout were heavy. Carnegie who had been diligently employed in burying the dottel of his smoked-out pipe in a hole in the ground and covering it with daisies

planted in a life-like manner, stopped, waiting for his answer. Never made mistress to her lover so hopelessly inopportune a request.

But Percy hesitated only a moment.

"Yes, of course, I will walk back with you," he said, "let's start at once, and then I can whip this old stream again for an hour in the evening. Come on, Sybil. Let me give you a hand."

Percy had his rod in its case in a moment, and he shouldered the luncheon hamper, and took it off to the farmhouse where it was to be called for. Carnegie sat quite still for several minutes after they had gone.

"Well, I'll be damned!" he said at length, and resumed his fishing thoughtfully.

Sybil was delightful on the way home. She was pleased at being able to get Percy to come with her, and she was doubly pleased at the presence of an audience when she made her proposal. She was a born coquette, that is to say a shallow and vain girl, and she considered it a *beau rôle* to carry Percy away in this offhand manner, while another man who had certainly been seriously interested in her was looking on. Had she known it, she had ample cause for self-congratulation, for Carnegie wondered for half an hour, what it was about her that made a keen fly-fisher walk home with her instead of fishing, and he argued to himself that it must be something really remarkable. He had a great respect for success, and certainly this unreasonable request

of hers so unquestionably obeyed, had succeeded beyond the measure of what he would have thought possible.

For himself he had a memorable afternoon, landing ten fish weighing nineteen pounds, yet when Percy enquired after his sport in the evening, he exhibited not the smallest shadow of jealousy, or regret. And Carnegie's respect for Sybil's achievement grew to admiration.

Mr. Montgomery was away from home that evening, and after the ladies had gone to bed, Percy, Carnegie, and Ernest Fellowes sat up talking. The night was cloudy and thickly overcast, and occasional glimpses of summer lightning were winked overhead, and reflected sombrely on the surface of the river. The moon had got lost somewhere behind the masses of clouds, and the light was no more than sufficient to show the broad outlines of the river and the hills beyond. To the east only was there a rift in the blackness; and a couple of stars, looking as if they had been painted with too wet a brush, and run in consequence, made a dispiriting glimmer.

They sat on the edge of the lawn which sloped down to the water's edge, and the noises of night crept about in garden-bed and shrubbery with padded footsteps. Three islands of lamplight were cast on the lawn from the open windows in the drawing-rooms, and soft white moths, from time to time, appeared suddenly on them as on a magic-

lantern sheet, and drifted aimlessly away again into the surrounding blackness. There was a threatening of thunder in the air, the remote storm was coming drowsily up along the river-valley, and Percy, who was keenly susceptible to influences of the weather, felt somewhat excited and restless.

"Why is one such a puppet in the hands of the clouds and the winds?" he said. "Why, because the lightning smoulders in the sky, should I feel as if some misfortune were going to happen? What a parody of a summer's night! It is thick with presentiment."

"It's all stomach," remarked Carnegie.

"That is no less odd," said Percy.

"I don't believe in presentiments," said Ernest. "I have had too many of them, and they are always wrong in about the probable proportion. For instance, I had a presentiment that nobody would buy *The Sheltered Life*."

"It was a rotten little book; about your worst," said Percy.

"I know it was. I ought to have known that it would have sold for that very reason. What's your presentiment now?"

"Vague misfortune. I shouldn't mind about a definite presentiment. There's going to be a storm, and the stream will be unfishable to-morrow morning, and I go away in the afternoon; those are the data."

"You ought to have stopped on the stream to-

day," said Carnegie, "the fish were feeding all afternoon."

"I had something better to do," said he.

"What did you do?" asked Ernest, who had not heard of Percy's earlier return.

"I walked home with Sybil after lunch. We went out in the punt until tea, and explored the island opposite. Also a truculent keeper made mouths at us."

Carnegie stroked his moustache thoughtfully.

"Have you ever lost your temper, Percy," he asked with apparent irrelevance.

Percy laughed. The question did not seem irrelevant to him.

"Not with Sybil, if you mean that," he said. "I was surprised this morning, though, that I didn't lose it, when she lost me that fish."

"I should have," said the other.

"Not if you were going to be married to her in a month."

"You're going to wait till after you are married," said Ernest.

"Oh, that's just in the style of *The Sheltered Life*," said Percy. "I should take care if I were you, Ernest; that sort of thing grows on one. The cheapest thing on earth is that vile species of repartee; and that odious and vulgar class of uncultivated person which reads your books, thinks that it is smart, and that the upper classes talk like that."

Ernest lit another cigarette from the stump of the old one.

"Quite right," he said. "I am cheap. I know it. I found it didn't pay to be expensive. I write for the great uncultivated class. In the suburbs they think I am a dear, delightful, naughty creature. The suburbs are one gold-mine, and yet we invest in South Africans and West Australians. And the tools you want to work it are only cheapness."

"Cheap things are nasty, and they never last."

"Who wants to last? I have no sympathy with the man who aims at a million when he can never get there. Browning speaks, somewhere, of the man, who, aiming at a million, only misses a unit. Seven or eight hundred thousand is what most people who aim at a million, miss. It is a considerable deficit."

"I'm afraid you've a grovelling soul," remarked Percy.

"I know I have. That is no discovery."

"Oh, don't grovel!" exclaimed Percy. "It is so easy. Anyone can do it. Think how fortunate you are, for if we are to believe you, you have reasons for grovelling; you are disappointed and overworked. So if you don't grovel, it will be a fine thing. It is not always given to everybody to do a fine thing. It is great luck to be given opportunities."

Fellowes sat in silence a moment.

"You are welcome to my opportunities," he said.

"If I could, I would give you them all. And I suppose you consider yourself unfortunate, for not having any. You, if you like, have no excuse for grovelling. Out of mere curiosity, not for any enmity to you, Percy, I should be glad if a quantity of untoward things happened to you, to give you an opportunity for not grovelling."

"Many thanks," said he. "Suggest some opportunities."

"Well, you might lose all your money to begin with, and then get jaundice, and have a Job-time of it. Oh, there are lots of things which would be admirable opportunities. I wonder how much it would take to make you knock under."

Again the lightning winked behind a mottled floor of cloud, and in the interval before the thunder answered, an owl flying softly across the lawn hooted and vanished like a ghost. Percy laughed.

"It thunders on the left and an owl hoots," he said, "your wish is heard. I wish I was superstitious, it would be so interesting. Well, it has struck twelve. I am going to bed. Good-night!"

He went in through the drawing-room indoors, leaving the other two still seated on their chairs on the lawn. They waited till he had vanished before either spoke. Then said Ernest:

"There goes the child of fortune! He is rich, he is young, he is handsome, he is engaged to the girl he loves, he has the temper of an angel, and the digestion of an ostrich."

Carnegie paused before answering.

"Is she very much in love with him?" he asked.

"Sufficiently I should think."

"'Sufficiently,' means a great deal in this case," said Carnegie. "She lost Percy a big fish to-day because she couldn't untie a string, and he didn't swear at her, and she walked him home after lunch when he wanted to go a-fishing, and he didn't say one word of protest. You don't fish, I think; but I can tell you that to go for a walk on an afternoon God made for fishing means a good deal. Cleopatra wouldn't have persuaded me to walk a yard with her on such an afternoon."

"Cleopatra was probably cleverer than Lady Sybil," said Ernest, "she would never have made such a request."

"But she wouldn't have got it done for her. There's the test, Lady Sybil did."

"It looks, then, as if Lady Sybil was very stupid, and also very clever."

"That is probably the case," said Carnegie. "And that is half the secret of her charm."

"I never felt the charm."

"I did," said Carnegie, with truly American candour, "and I feel it still. I was deadly in love with her a few months ago."

He paused a moment, then spoke with the frankness which he used when referring to the pig industry in Chicago.

"And I am still," he said.

CHAPTER X.

The Eve of the Birthday.

PERCY had arranged to keep his birthday down at Abbotsworthy, and it gave a good opportunity for the reopening of his house. The tenants had very obligingly vacated a fortnight before their lease was up and he had instantly poured into the house an army of painters and carpenters to do a quantity of small necessary jobs. He was only meaning to spend a day or two there just for the celebration of his birthday, and he would then abandon the house again to painters and plumbers till his return with Sybil from the yachting trip at the end of October, when they would establish themselves there for the winter. The wedding had been definitely fixed for the twentieth of September, and he would say "Good-bye" to Sybil the day after his birthday, not to meet her again till they met at the door of St. Peter's, Eaton Square.

He had gone up from the Montgomerys' straight to London, where he had an interview with the elder Mr. Samuelson on the subject of Lady Otterbourne's debt. The old money-lender licked the dust beneath his feet, offered to make him fabulous loans whenever he required on infinitesimal interest, but entirely declined to shorten at all the re-

newal of Lady Otterbourne's debt. His conscience, he declared, would not allow him to do so, thereby creating a pleasing uncertainty in Percy's mind as to whether any two people meant the same thing by that much-used and abused word. Percy had not ready money to pay the debt at once, but he wanted to arrange to pay it as soon as he came of age, thus cutting off the last month, but Mr. Samuelson, secure in his rights, only regretted that his inward monitor would not consent to such a course. Percy, however, got some interesting facts about the trade, and came to the conclusion that the punishment of the cities of the plains would be a merciful fate for these sharks.

He arrived at Abbotsworthy on the thirteenth, and his guests were not to come till the next day, for he had purposely planned this solitary evening in his old home. He got there just before tea-time, and as he sat in the library having tea Blessington came softly to see him, and insisted, when she poured out his second cup for him, on putting in the good-conduct three lumps of sugar.

"And when do all the grand folks come?" she asked.

"To-morrow," he said, "but to-night, Blessington, we two simple folks will be alone. You shall come and see me after dinner and send me to bed at ten, and I shan't go. Then on the nineteenth you shall come up to London in your best silk dress, and all the grand folks will ask, 'Who is her Grace there?' Where am I to sleep to-night?"

Blessington beamed.

"Eh, I thought you'd like your old room at the top of the house," she said. "And I got it ready for you all myself. There's your old cracked looking glass, which I've had in my cupboard ever since you went away, and your two china candlesticks. Eh, dear me!"

Percy smiled.

"You dear old Blessington," he said, "that is just what I like. And are you next door, so that if I'm frightened in the night, I can tap at the wall?"

Blessington broke out into gentle, toothless laughter.

"Bless the boy," she said, "he's forgotten nothing! And I shall bring you your cup of tea in the morning, Master Percy; but if you've woke me up with any of your tappings, you shan't have it. I say so, and my word is enough."

Percy's guests arrived the next day, filling the house. Some were friends of Sybil's known only slightly to him, others were school or college friends of his own. But the fact of all meeting for one particular purpose seemed to produce an amalgamating tendency, and promise success to the party. Carnegie was there, looking as radiantly calm as ever; and among others, Blanche Stoakley, who had come with her father.

Lady Otterbourne had never seen Abbotsworthy before, and she was quite "carried away," as she expressed it. She made Percy conduct her right

through the house immediately on her arrival, and surveyed each room with an air that seemed appropriate to one who is making a bargain and wishes to see what the other party offers, and to an auctioneer inspecting a property. She regarded everything from its market value; and while neither caring nor professing to care for pictures, the fact that a masterpiece which she did not look at was signed by somebody of whom she had heard, was recommendation enough; and, to her, the authenticity of a picture was evidently worth more than its beauty. Soon, however, her air of calm inquiry gave way to respectful appreciation, and the magisterial attitude faded into admiration. In fact, at the end of the picture-gallery, she sank into a chair, and, like the Queen of Sheba, there was no more spirit left in her.

"It is among the first houses in England," she said. "I hope you will entertain royalty, Percy; that always gives a house a *cachet*. A fine house, good shooting and pretty women, that is what they enjoy." And she added to herself: "Thank Heavens, Sybil is not on the eve of a marriage with a porkbutcher!"

After dinner, Lady Otterbourne called Percy to her, and told him to take her to some secluded corner. This he did.

"Percy," she said, "I shall not see you again, after to-morrow, till we meet on the 20th. I want to say two words to you. I am giving over to you

what I hold dearest, and there is no one to whom I would more willingly entrust Sybil. There is a subject to which you forbade me ever to allude again, but I shall do so. You have shewn yourself splendidly generous——"

Percy stopped his ears.

"For Heaven's sake," he said.

"And you have shewn yourself modest," went on Lady Otterbourne, after a pause. "You love Sybil, for she is lovable. You will always be kind to her —that I know. And——God bless you."

Lady Otterbourne looked remarkably handsome at that moment, and she uttered the concluding words as if she was conferring an order on a thoroughly deserving object, one whose merits had fully entitled him to receive it at her hands. She rose, held out her hand to him, and then kissed him.

"Thank you," said Percy, quite simply and naturally; and together they went back out of the smaller drawing room, where they were sitting, to rejoin the others.

In certain ways the party assembled at the house was a rather remarkable mixture. Lady Otterbourne's sister and her husband, Lord Tewkesbury, were there, the wife looking about Sybil's age, and he an ill-preserved man of sixty. In another part of the room the present Lord Otterbourne, Sybil's half-brother, who had a face like a dull rabbit, was listening with ill-concealed impa-

tience to some quiet, precise remarks from Lord Stoakley, on the subject of guano. Mrs. Montgomery was pouring out floods of thick, unstrained gossip, like a river in spate, to several debilitated young men; and Ernest Fellowes was deep in conversation with Sybil's younger sister, Lady Catherine—who slept, so to speak, in the stables, and dreamed of dogs—on the treatment of laminitis in fox terriers, a subject on which he held perfectly unbiassed views, having never heard of the disease in question before. Sybil was enjoying herself immensely; she loved beautiful rooms and fine pictures, especially when they were shortly to be her's, and she was talking ecstatically about the beauty of *Parsifal* to Carnegie, who was not quite sure whether *Parsifal* was a musical composer or a place in Germany. Blanche Stoakley was making herself fascinating to two little cousins of Percy's, who had been allowed by Blessington to sit up till ten o'clock for a treat, and had already been treated as a *confidante* on the subject of that state-secret, what they were going to give their cousin for a birthday present. Others gathered and separated into desultory groups, and in the cardroom next door, Mr. Montgomery was already in the proud position of having rubiconed his opponent twice at picquet, which he did apologetically.

Sybil went to her mother's room that night to talk to her a little before going to bed.

"I didn't exaggerate, mother, did I?" she asked.

"It is a royal place is it not? And I am going to be mistress of it. How well the evening went off! And what tact Percy has, hasn't he? He even made Otterbourne look pleasant for a moment."

Her mother laughed.

"That is a distinction," she said. "I haven't spoken to him: there is no good in talking to irritating people. Yes, it is a splendid place. Look at the tapestry in this room! And I suppose there are other bedrooms as good. I wonder what it costs to keep up. How delightful to think that it doesn't matter what it costs. Sybil, my dear, you have a great opportunity. With this, and all that this implies, and with a clever popular man for your husband, you can make a great figure. It all depends on yourself. In a few years, if you take pains, you can treat the world as you please. You will be rich enough never to need to make yourself cheap. How much that implies! Yes, decidedly, you are a fortunate girl. I see Mr. Carnegie is here again. Did you get Percy to ask him?"

Sybil's eyes danced.

"Yes, I think he is so pleasant. And I thought it would be so amusing to——"

"Well?"

"Oh, nothing, mother. I thought it would be amusing to see him in Percy's house. Did you notice that magnificent gold-plate on the side-board at dinner? It has the Hampshire arms on it, old Mr. Gerard bought it at the sale, Percy told me. I

want to persuade him to have their arms taken out, and his own put in. He shewed it me one day, and I thought it must be silver-gilt."

"I see no signs of electro-plate about this house," remarked Lady Otterbourne, amorously.

"No, everything is so genuine, and so like Percy," said Sybil. "He is the most genuine old darling I ever saw. Oh, mother, I love him!" and her beautiful breast heaved under the pearls which he had given her.

Lady Otterbourne came and stood by Sybil and warmed her hands at the little cedar-wood fire which was glowing on the grate, for the evening had turned chilly. Again as once before that evening, she was the prey to a simple, straightforward, human emotion.

"Sybil," she cried with sudden earnestness, "I should be miserable if I thought you did not. He is generous, he is as true as steel—always remember that. Ah, I know."

Sybil raised her eyebrows.

"You mean about that money he gave you in the summer," she said, with a slight malicious pleasure in dotting her mother's i's. "Yes, wasn't it dear of him. And the little note he wrote you really was the sweetest thing I ever saw. I almost cried when he showed it me."

"May you never know what it is to want money like that," said her mother.

Sybil laughed again.

"It isn't likely is it?" she said. "And now, mother, I must go to bed. How late it is! What a pity it is that when one has been amused one always finds it later than one expects!"

"Yes, it is unfortunate," said Lady Otterbourne, "but luckily, as long as one can be amused one remains young. The two balance. Good-night, dearest child. Look your best to-morrow and please Percy. That will be your duty for the rest of your life."

"And his to please me," said Sybil, kissing her mother. "Again the two balance. I wonder which of us will succeed best. Oh, I assure you I shall try very hard. It would be too stupid not to try to please him always. Good-night, mother."

Percy when he went to bed, sat long looking into his fire, and watching the red pictures there change and shift. Somehow he found that until this evening his future had never been wholly real to him. Sybil had been to him a dream, but to-night the dream had come suddenly true. With her under his own roof, with this coming into his inheritance, with his marriage but six days off, it seemed to him that he had been like some musician who has long heard a melody floating in the air, but in a moment, though it has been for days familiar to him, he captures it, sets it down in black and white, and brings it into the domain of recorded art. Already the yacht which was to take them on their wedding trip had left Southampton,

and was even now steaming up channel to London, where they would go on board her.

The same moon which to-night lay floating on a sky covered with stars like swarming golden bees, would only have grown a little rounder, a little brighter, when she watched them on their southward journey. The dew that to-night glistened on her deck would scarcely be dry, he thought, before they walked that deck together. Before seven more suns had set the bar would have been broken between life and life, the mystery of man and woman would have been solved by each, the riddle of life would have been answered, and the crown of humanity worn with the woman he loved would have been made his. Thankfulness as deep as awe was on his spirit, the best that life offered was to be given him. It seemed incredible to him that all his life long he had never until the last year known Sybil. He could not conceive how he had lived without her. Years had passed—each wasted,—but how golden a repayment was his now! Often and often he had looked at her face with the determination to be coldly critical, to demand of Nature the dignity of sweetness, the humanness of all that was best in art, and as often had his critical powers confessed themselves baffled. Each line in her face was perfect to the critical view, and to the eye of a man how lovable was each! He had watched, so he told himself, the dawning of love in her eyes, as a man might watch a perfect sunrise; he had seen,

scarcely crediting the beautiful boon, the wonderful surrender of all to him. There were many things too good to be true. Here was the best of all, and of all the truest!

He had met her first—how well he remembered it—at an evening party in London the February before, and, in a way, he had distrusted her. At any rate he had wished that he had been a perfect stranger, that she had known no more of him than the passer-by in the street knew of the passer-by. He had cursed the notoriety of his wealth, he had even, for a moment, thought that so welcoming a smile would not have been given to a man in rags. One day at Baireuth he had been unable not to tell her this, and she had half laughed at, half scolded him for the thought.

"You thought that of me, Percy!" she said. "But I forgive you, you did not know me well, then. And, indeed, I am not always nice to strangers. But you——"

After that first meeting he had met her constantly and yet more constantly. At the different houses he went to, she had often been there, and at one time Carnegie, it seemed, had always been there. Percy thought that he must have been in love with her; and the same did excellent credit to his good taste.

The upper crust of coals in the fire fell in suddenly, giving vent to hissing little escapes of gas. Some of these caught fire, and sickle-shaped

flapping flames sprang up; from some, spurts of bluish flame blew out, from others, not yet in flame, there bubbled out little crags and peaks of soft coal tar, which hardened quickly in the heat. The whole aspect of the fire was changed, and his thoughts changed with it, and fastened on the next day.

The next day was a distinct bore, but a necessary one. There would be a dinner of tenantry, and he would have to wear a frock-coat and make a speech. There would be fireworks and farmers, and an atmosphere of buttonholes and congratulations. There would also be an interview with the lawyer, a dapper, cheerful little man, with a great appetite for good port, who had come down that evening. The will, he supposed, would be read to him, throughout which he would have to maintain a suitably decorous attitude, while all the time he was thinking of Sybil. He would probably have to sign his name a great many times, and have to try to understand what was meant by debenture stock and first mortgage bonds. After that the little lawyer would no doubt explain exactly what he inherited separately from his mother, and point out what came under her will. Finally, Mr. Sale would give him the sealed communication from his grandfather, and wish him joy. This business he had arranged should take place before dinner. In the morning a party of them were going into Winchester, then followed the tenant's dinner, and after

that a garden party. The whole day will be wasted in publicity; he would hardly see Sybil at all.

Percy sat staring at the fire till it had almost died out, and only a crinkled arch of hardened ash remained. In matters of art and intellectual questions he was critical and fond of analysis, but in questions of life and love and the great needs of humanity he was as simple as a child. He undressed quickly, and kneeling down by his bedside, he thanked God out of a simple and full heart for having given him Sybil, and for having ordained that they must love each other.

CHAPTER XI.

The Birthday.

THE morning of the fifteenth was all that such a morning should traditionally be, bright, crisp and invigorating with the slightest touch of frost, enough to give a sparkle to the air, but not enough to have blackened the dahlias and scarlet salvias which ran in a glowing riband bed of colour down the path leading from the lawn to the fields by the river. In the morning, as had been arranged, some of the party went into Winchester; but Percy and Sybil were among those who remained, and after the others had started they strolled about the garden together.

"It is a bore that we have to get through this day," he said. "For me what a programme! A tenants' dinner and some suitable remarks, then a garden party and some suitable remarks, then all the business, the reading of the will and so on. A series of suitable remarks in fact. However, the day has begun better than I expected, for I thought I should not get a word with you till evening."

Sybil pressed his arm.

"And I too," she said. "But Percy how odd of you! I should love all this if I were you. I

should love to see all the tenants, and think they were the tenants of my property. It is an entering in of the promised land. And I should be awfully excited about the will. How odd that for all these years you shouldn't really have known how much money you had."

"I can't get excited about that," said Percy. "I am perfectly certain there is more than I want. Lord Stoakley has told me so much, and he would not form an inadequate idea of how much I want."

"It is quite romantic," said Sybil. "And are you not excited about the sealed letter? Supposing it is something awful?"

"How can it be anything awful?" said he. "And indeed, Sybil, while you are with me, there is nothing in the world which can matter to me, so long as nothing makes you love me less."

"I can think of nothing that could do that, dearest," she said in a low voice, and in the liquidness of her beautiful eyes which met his so frankly, he seemed to see the clear depths of her soul.

"Thursday—to-day is Thursday," said Percy, "and Tuesday is the twentieth. Next Thursday where shall we be, Sybil? The yacht will get to London this evening."

Sybil blushed faintly over her face and neck.

"I do not care where we shall be, Percy," she said, "for shall we not be together? Can anything else matter?"

In the field below the house there had been erected a great tent, where the farmers were to dine. From the garden they could see servants hurrying to and fro with piles of plates and dishes, and already there were collecting about the walks little groups of tenants with their wives and red-faced children all ashine with soap. Percy shook hands with several of these, who stared in amazement at Sybil, who seemed to them more of a vision than a reality. She was dressed entirely in white, and her glorious face looked out of its ribbons and laces like a flower out of a flower. She had no hat on, and the wind gently stirred her dark, low-growing hair. And when she smiled at them and kissed those of the children who seemed to her pretty and less shiny than the rest, she won the hearts of the fathers and mothers by that simple graciousness, which was so clearly no effort to her.

As the garden got more full of these groups they strolled back across the lawn to the house again. The sunlight fell in rich and mellow abundance on the dull red of the old bricks, it flashed diamonds on the windows, and gilded the gilded vanes at the top of the two towers. Never had the place looked more magnificent, nor Sybil so worthy of being its châtelaine, and as she looked she felt a new pang of self-envy.

"How splendid the house looks!" she said. "Oh, Percy, it is no use denying it, but I love gorgeous and beautiful things! I love pomp and fine rooms

and many servants, and the *insouciance* that wealth brings! I am worldly. You must try to grow used to a worldly wife!"

"There is no one whom beautiful things befit so well as you," said Percy. "You are in the great style, as I have often told you; you were made for all that. And, thank God!" he added, "we were made for each other!"

Whether Sybil ever really loved him or not, this history does not pretend to determine, but it is certain that at that moment she thought that she did. That probably is the deepest feeling of which a shallow nature is capable, and this morning when they walked to and fro in the sunlight in sight of their splendid home, at any rate, even if she deceived him, she deceived herself. She mixed him up in her mind with all he brought her—for that, at least, she had a heart-felt admiration, a passionate craving,—and when they entered the house again, she said to him that which seemed to him on her lips ever new and wonderful.

"Oh, I love you!" she whispered.

The whole of the party in the house lunched at a sort of high table in the marquee while the tenants dined, and after lunch Percy spoke in answer to the drinking of his health which followed. Sybil sat next him on his right, and when he alluded to his approaching marriage and to her to whom, in the appropriate manner, "it gives so much pleasure to be able to be among you to-day," they rose and

cheered to the echo. Sybil, to whom nothing was so pleasant as popularity, bowed and blushed and smiled, and made altogether a very good impression. In due course the garden party arrived, strolled about for a few hours, and behaved as garden parties do, and when they had gone Percy went to the library, where he was to meet Lord Stoakley and the lawyer, Mr. Sale. They were both there and waiting for him, and without delay Mr. Sale produced his grandfather's will.

"It is a very satisfactory statement that I shall have the honour to make to you, Mr. Gerard," he said, "and it will not detain you long. The business of which your grandfather speaks is still in a most flourishing condition, and of late years the income which has been derived from it, which has all, as you will see he instructed us, been applied to the same, has immensely increased. Perhaps you would like to read the will for yourself."

He passed the document, which was quite short, to Percy, and he ran his eyes over it.

He read that the testator being sound in mind, etc., bequeathed all his property, personal and real, to his grandson, Percy Gerard. He held invested in various securities the sum of one million four hundred thousand pounds, which yielded an interest amounting to about sixty thousand a year. His houses at Abbotsworthy and in Eaton Square he willed should be let until his grandson attained the age of twenty-five years, when they were to pass

into his hands. The remainder of his property consisted in certain business houses in London, of which he was sole proprietor. The details of these would be learned by his grandson when he opened the sealed letter which should likewise be delivered to him on his twenty-fifth birthday. Until then he was to be able to draw on his guardian and executor of the will, Lord Stoakley, for an allowance not exceeding five thousand pounds a year. If any remained of this it was to be invested in trust for him, together with the annual income derived from the businesses spoken of above, and the rent of the two houses in Abbotsworthy and London.

Percy looked up.

"Apparently the income has been added to the capital, ever since my grandfather died," he said. "What is the total sum now invested?"

"Nearly three millions," said Mr. Sale, with visible exultation.

Percy looked vacantly round the room.

"Good God!" he said, and applied himself to the reading once more.

At the end of the will were a few clauses relating to his mother's money. She had died before old Mr. Gerard, and the money had been left in trust to Percy, with Mr. Gerard as executor. It amounted to thirty-three thousand pounds.

There were one or two bequests to be paid when he came of age, and an annuity to Blessington of one hundred and fifty pounds for life. One thou-

sand pounds was given to Lord Stoakley as executor.

Percy folded the will up again and put it into its envelope. For a moment he realized the grinding oppression of great wealth.

"I understand that this is mine, absolutely," he said, "mine to chuck into the sea if I wish—I beg your pardon," he added hastily, "I have not yet thanked you, Lord Stoakley, and you, Mr. Sale, for your guardianship of my property. I am very grateful to you both."

He shook hands with both of them, and sat down again.

"There was also a sealed letter, was there not," he resumed, "which was to be given to me to-day? Have you it here?"

Mr. Sale opened the japanned tin case which had held the will, and was lettered in white paint, "Estate of Percy Gerard, Esq.," and took out of it a large square canvas envelope directed to him in his grandfather's minute handwriting, which Percy clearly remembered. The ink he noticed had turned rather faded and brown.

"This is it," said Mr. Sale. "I see it is marked private; if you wish to read it now, we will leave you."

Percy held the envelope in his hand a moment, as if weighing it.

"I will take it with me, and read it before dinner," he said. "There is nothing to detain me now, is there?"

"Nothing except our congratulations," said Mr. Sale. "You have a princely fortune, Mr. Percy, and one that befits your station, and, may I add, yourself and your wife."

Lord Stoakley and the other went out of the room, leaving Percy there. He looked round the room once or twice, then walked to the window, still holding the unopened letter in his hand, and looked out. His face was grave—almost sombre. This great fortune of his gave him no feeling of pleasure, rather, it stifled and oppressed him. Henceforth he was bound in golden chains. Outside on the lawn, a party of those staying with him were sitting under the cedar on the lawn. He could hear the tone of their talk, the rise and fall of their voices, and every now and then a tinkle of laughter. Sitting on the grass was Sybil, with Carnegie by her. At sight of her his face brightened; she, at any rate, would hug the golden chains. He half tore open the envelope containing his grandfather's communication to him, then suddenly he stopped, and running upstairs, put it down on the dressing table in the little room which he had occupied as a boy, and which, two days ago, Blessington had had once more got ready for him. He left it there, and, going out, joined his party on the lawn.

They talked and laughed awhile together, but, before long, Sybil rose and began strolling towards the house. In a moment he had joined her, and

they walked up the long gravel path leading by the windows of the drawing-room.

"Where have you been all this age, Percy?" she asked. "I have not seen you—for—for hours."

"So long as that?" he said. "And it has seemed long to me. I have just been reading my grandfather's will, with the statement of his property."

Sybil stopped dead; her face was all attention.

"Ah!" she said, "How interesting! Tell me."

"It was very short," said Percy. "I am heir to all he possessed. In my minority it has been accumulating. In fact, Sybil, I am rich. Too rich, I think. I have about three millions, apart from the income of some business about which I do not yet know."

She still remained stock still, only her eye brightened, and her cheek flushed. She looked divinely, radiantly beautiful.

"That is a great deal of money," she said at length.

"Yes, a great deal. Oh, Sybil, I wish I had not a penny."

Sybil stared at him.

"Why, Percy, why?" she asked.

"I don't know," he said. "Perhaps I hardly wish it. Are you glad, Sybil?"

Sybil restrained a sudden impulse to clap her hands, to laugh, to shriek.

"Oh, Percy, of course, I am glad!" she cried.

"I love, as I have told you, wealth, and all wealth brings; pomp, luxury, power, the envy of others, yes, I even love that. Poor, dear Percy, you look as if you had only inherited a law-suit. You feel the responsibility. Of course there is responsibility attached to such an amount. Let me share it with you, give it me all—I will bear the responsibility."

They had passed out of sight of the others, and Percy caught her suddenly and quickly in his arms.

"Oh, my darling!" he cried, "what do I care for wealth? I cannot help feeling that somehow it comes between us, that I cannot offer you myself alone. I wish I could do that, dearest, just for the pleasure of hearing you say that you take me for myself. Oh, I know you do. I know that. But I wish I was poor; it must be exquisite to be poor."

Sybil's smile, and her quick trembling kiss, seemed to him a sufficient answer.

"And the sealed letter," she said, "you told me there was a sealed letter. What did that say?"

"I have not yet opened it," said Percy. "I left it on my bedroom table, because I saw you on the lawn. I will look at it when we go in to dress."

"What do you suppose it is about?" she asked. "Can you make no guess?"

"I haven't the slightest idea," said Percy. "Perhaps, I ought to have looked at it at once. But I don't care. You are with me, and that is enough. Is it not enough?"

They strolled along the walk, past the riband bed, and stood looking out over the fields to the west. Below, in the last glow of the sunset the river lay like a string of crimson pools from the reflection of the sky, a thrush in the thicket bubbled out a throatful of song, from the dim water-meadow a frog croaked. Somewhere down the lane, a lad walked whistling, and far away a churchbell rang and told the hour. The sky was cloudless and the lowlying meadows without a wisp of vapour. Only over Winchester a haze of violet coloured smoke hovered, and veiled the lines of red houses, and was pricked by the grey pinnacles and gables of the Cathedral. A skein of starlings flying in a V-shape streamed westwards until they were lost in the crimson of the sunset. Below in the meadow the marquee had already been taken down and the men were setting up the fireworks, which were to be let off as soon as it was dark. Curious angular Catherine wheels were already nailed to the screen on which they would be burned, and a number of rings had been driven in to support the rocket sticks. In the centre was a large set-piece, looking like a faintly traced map, and above it the initials of Percy and Sybil. They were ingeniously contrived to move towards each other on little wheels as they burned, till at the end they formed a double interlacing monogram.

The two stood by the sunken fence which separated the meadow from the lawn for a little while

in silence. Sybil's face was turned to the sunset, which lit smouldering fire in the outlying threads of her black hair and flushed her face with rose-colour. Her mouth was a little parted as if in a smile, and showed the edge of her white even teeth, and Percy's eyes fed on her with the hunger of love. He felt as if all his past life—his identity even—had faded from him, and that he had awoke to find that he was merged in the personality of another. Sybil met his gaze with radiant, unaverted look, and her smile deepened in her eyes and in her mouth. Percy had no words for her and did not seek to find them, he felt she did not desire them; never, he thought, had each so understood the other.

The boom of the dressing gong from the house roused them.

"Come, we must go in," said she. "You have to read that letter before dinner."

Percy started.

"Ah, yes," he said, "I had forgotten it. Let us go in."

CHAPTER XII.

The Opening of the Letter.

He went up to his room, parting from her at the top of the great staircase, on which, as the sunset died, the little bunches of electric lights were beginning to glow. Then he turned off the main passage, up a smaller flight of stairs and through a baize door. There were three rooms beyond, one, which had originally been his day-nursery and was now Blessington's sitting room; a second, her bedroom; the third, his own bedroom, which he had occupied when a boy, and which had in former days been his night nursery. He well remembered his pride when it ceased to be called the nursery and became "Master Percy's bed room." His man had put out his dress clothes for dinner, and he dressed quickly, meaning to reserve the reading of the letter until he was ready. Partly a kind of vague desire to put off the reading of it prompted him, partly, in case it was long, he wished to be ready for dinner, and so could continue reading until the last moment. It lay with the envelope half torn open on his dressing-table, where he had left it. As he dressed, he noticed how his mind, full to overflowing with the thought of Sybil, dwelt on tiny and trivial things with microscopic observa-

tion. He smelt in his sponge the salt freshness of the sea; his carbolic toothpowder had a vivid pungency about it, and reminded him of the smell in a London hospital which he had gone to years ago, in order to see a friend of his who was a medical student there. When he poured a little sweet verbena into his bath, there rose before him, unbidden and extraordinarily clear, the garden walk at Mr. Montgomery's house by the Thames, over which grew that delectable plant, the leaves of which, as they strolled up and down, he and Sybil used to pluck and rub in their hands. On his mantlepiece stood a small photograph of Titian's "Moses in the Bullrushes" in a brass frame. Blessington had given it him when he was five, and he remembered with the most minute distinctness how he had taken it out of the tinsel paper in which she had wrapped it, and thought it the most beautiful thing he had ever seen. On his dressing-table stood the cracked looking-glass which his nurse had kept in her cupboard during all the years he had not been at Abbotsworthy, and which he had broken himself with a cricket ball with which he and a boy friend were playing on a wet afternoon in this same little bed-room. His diary seemed to be written on the walls of his room.

His bath was refreshing after the long and tiring day, and it was a relief to get into fresh and clean clothes. He dressed himself as far as coat and waistcoat, and then sat down in a chair in his shirt sleeves and took up the half-opened envelope.

Inside were two sheets covered with the exquisite minute handwriting of his grandfather, a hand more like a woman's than a man's, and he unfolded them. The paper smelled faintly of the camphor which Mr. Sale no doubt had put among the papers, and the ink, as on the envelope, was turned brown. He read thus:

"My dearest Grandson,—This letter I write to you to wish you every good thing on this your twenty-fifth birthday. To-day you will have had read to you, or you will read, my will, in the presence, no doubt, of Mr. Sale, my lawyer, and Lord Stoakley. Perhaps they will not be alive, and other executors will have been appointed, but in any case I am sure that all will have been done in order, and that now you will find yourself a very rich man. I, of course, will have been dead for some years, for the doctors have told me to day I cannot live many weeks, and as I write this I wonder with intense curiosity whether I shall be conscious of what you are, at the moment, doing, and whether I shall be perhaps by your side, looking over your shoulder and watching you while you read. I have never much troubled myself about what will happen after I am dead, for the simple reason that I have no means whatever of telling, and it is quite idle to guess at and invent answers for a riddle, when there is no one to assure one if one has guessed right or not.

"Well, my dear grandson, here are many happy returns of your birthday to you, and health and happiness to enable you to enjoy the wealth you have inherited. By the time you read this letter it ought to have become very considerable, quite enough, in fact, to enable you and your wife and children (if you are thinking of marrying) to pass through this life without being obliged to deny yourselves anything in reason that is purchaseable. The money is

yours absolutely, and you can build a college with it, or send out missionaries to non-existent islands, or lose it on the Stock Exchange or double it again, without causing me either pleasure or regret. For of one thing I feel certain, that as soon as we have ceased to do with this world, we have ceased to do with money, and therefore the disposition of my money after it is in your hands does not give me a moment's thought.

"Years before you open this letter, my dear Percy, you will quite certainly have been told two things which contradict one another; the first that money is a curse, the second that it is the only thing that matters. Neither are true, though both have some shadow of truth. In the hands of a fool, money is a curse; but then anything is a curse in the hands of a fool. In fact, that is not a bad definition of a fool—a man who misuses all that is given him. Again, though not the greatest blessing, money is a very considerable one, and it will buy you everything, except those few things that are really worth having, and of these it will buy you a sort of counterfeit, which you may easily mistake for the real thing. For instance, though it will not bring you health, it will buy you surgical and medical aid and alleviation, and though it will not buy you a loving wife it will buy you a beautiful one. Take this money then for what it is worth; do not depreciate it, but do not exaggerate its importance. You early showed a real taste for artistic matters, and in this, though it will not buy you skill, it will enable you to receive lessons from anyone you please; and if you have decided not to paint yourself, it will enable you to surround yourself with beautiful pictures and lovely things. *La consolation des arts:* there is a great deal of truth in that exquisite phrase of Flaubert's!

"It is exceedingly pleasant to me to look forward like this, and be able to talk to you once more, and at the risk of seeming tedious, I shall continue to chat to you a little. How have you grown up, Percy? You promised to be tall

and handsome, and you were always sweet-tempered. These gifts are worth more than all my money, but money is by no means a bad frame for them. It will be in your power, I fancy, to make a great name, and here again money will be an immense advantage to you. If you go in for an artistic career of any sort, you will never have to work against time, or turn out anything which seems to you unworthy of your best. People often say that to be poor, to have to work for one's bread, is a great incentive. Possibly it is to all but absolutely first-rate men; but the best work, I think, is always turned out by men who do not have to do that. I dare say you could quote instances to the contrary, but you can always get an instance of everything. Again, if you go in for politics, it is no bad thing to have a good deal of money to back you. Electors feel that a wealthy man who takes the trouble to bawl on hustings must be in earnest, when, if he chose, he might be drinking and sleeping (the paradise of the proletariat). Again, I don't know what the current price of peerages will be in England when you are twenty five, but of course anything of that kind, if you wish for it, will be well within your means. You ought to have about three million pounds, under the excellent management of Mr. Sale and Lord Stoakley, by the time you come of age, as well as a very handsome income, which, if I know anything of the world, is not likely to decrease as the years go on."

Percy had drawn his chair close up to the window, but he was obliged to stop a moment to light a candle. Just as he lit it, the dinner-gong sounded from below, and he glanced to see how much was left of this communication still unread. It would not take him more than a minute or two to finish it, and he sat down again, wishing, in some undefined, nervous way, to get it over, glad to see there was so little more. He turned the page.

"And now, dear Percy, before I stop, it will be only right to tell you how I made my fortune. I began in a small way, but all I could save I put into a money-lending business—Samuelson, of Jermyn Street. On the death of the old Mr. Samuelson, I bought the concern right out, retaining his son as business manager. He now also has a son, about the same age, I think, as yourself. I realised, as you can well believe, now that you know the folly of the world, enormous profits, and I bought two other businesses of the same nature—Appleton's and Gore's, both of St. James's Street. With my growing available funds, I speculated enormously, and I had, as I suppose everyone has, ups and downs. But I amassed the fortune which you now inherit, and from these three money-lending agencies you are drawing, as well as the bulk of the capital I leave you, a very handsome income. That is the history of your fortune.

"But one more word. It is possible when you read this that you will have a sudden pang of disgust and loathing for your wealth. Such a feeling will be natural, even creditable to you, but it should only be momentary. You are, I imagine, a young man of artistic tastes and considerable fastidiousness. All I say is, think it over, and remember that every penny that anyone gains (unless one owns a mine) is made at the expense of somebody else.

"I am, my dear Percy,

"Your affectionate grandfather,

"HENRY JAMES GERARD."

Percy replaced the paper neatly back in its envelope, put on his coat and waistcoat and went quickly downstairs. The others had all assembled and were waiting for him. He apologised for being so late, and giving his arm to Lady Otterbourne, led the way into dinner.

CHAPTER XIII.

The Evening of the Birthday.

PERCY took his seat at the table with a heightened colour and a flashing eye. For the time a sort of wild irresponsibility was over him. He knew the worst, and the worst was as bad as it could be. But at present he hardly felt it, it was like a blow delivered under water, not painful at once. He would have to think what should be done, though as to that he felt no doubt what conclusions he would come to, and tell Sybil of it. But just now he had a party with him who would go to-morrow, Sybil and Lady Otterbourne he must persuade to stay till the afternoon, and when the others were gone he would tell them. Let him meet the thing at any rate, if not with courage, with the show of courage; and for the sake of good manners, banish from his mind, while it was his duty to entertain his guests, the horror that lay in those sheets which he had folded up and put away in their envelope. Suddenly he remembered that he had left the envelope lying on his table, and he had a spasm of fear that some housemaid tidying his room might read it. He beckoned to one of the footmen and told him to get it and bring it to him. With it in his pocket, he felt that for the present his secret

was secure, shared by none but Mr. Sale and Lord Stoakley, and that he could more easily put the thought away from him. But all the time his spirit cowered and shook inwardly. For one moment as he came downstairs to dinner a sudden doubt had come into his mind as to what Sybil would do when she heard his decision, but he had instantly cast it from him. But for that moment the doubt had been there, an exquisite torture, and he still shrank from fear of the involuntary repetition of that horrible pain, just as a patient will wince, after some surgical incision, for dread of the knife again. From the other side of the table he saw Mr. Sale looking at him, and he felt ashamed of meeting his eye, for he probably knew the secret.

He turned to Lady Otterbourne.

"I particularly want you and Sybil to stay till to-morrow afternoon," he said. "I have an affair of some importance to talk to you about. It is really important."

Lady Otterbourne looked doubtful.

"We have a lot to do in London to-morrow," she said. "Dressmakers also are affairs of some importance, or so Sybil and I think. Are you sure your affair is as great as that?"

"Yes, I am sure it is," said Percy, "I beg you to stop."

"Well, I daresay we could. There will be telegrams to send. By-the-way, Percy, I must congratulate you on the upshot of the will. Sybil is a

very fortunate girl. I have never seen her so animated or excited."

She turned and looked at him, and noticed his raised colour and flushed face.

"You too look excited," she said briefly.

Percy drank off a glass of champagne.

"Yes, I too am excited," he said. "What fun it is coming of age, and what a pity one cannot do it oftener. And there will be fireworks after; I love fireworks; I always feel a sort of affinity to them."

"But not to the fizzling out, I hope," said Lady Otterbourne, "and the descent of the rocket-stick?"

"O, who knows?" he said. "Who will assure anyone that he won't fizzle out. After all so many people do nothing but fizzle out from the first. They, like Charles II., are merely a long time in dying, for all their life is a sort of dying. What if I should lose all my money? There would be precious little left of me."

"O, three millions is too large a thing to loose," said Lady Otterbourne. "Besides, you are not the kind of man to whom a fortune is merely a sort of label to prevent his getting lost in this big world. Without it you would still have an existence, whereas most of us wouldn't."

Percy turned eagerly to her. The doubt again threatened him.

"Do you think that?" he said. "Are you sure you think that?"

Lady Otterbourne laughed.

"Sure? Of course I am sure. What is the matter with you?"

"Nothing in the world," he said. "I am excited, I know. I have been excited ever since I knew Sybil. What an immense benefit she has conferred on me in that alone. Supposing she was to jilt me to-morrow, how immensely I should still be in her debt. Oh, I don't mean that, of course."

Once more, as he spoke, the horrible doubt assailed him, and a sudden contraction of pain crossed his face, but it passed in a moment.

Lady Otterbourne, with all her shallow folly, had a certain amount of shrewdness, and she did not wholly trust her conclusions that the discovery that he had three million pounds to his credit would excite Percy like that. It is true that it would have excited her; but Percy had always lived in the expectation of something of the kind: at any rate, he was used to being rich.

Lady Tewkesbury was sitting on the other side of Percy, and she cut in in the pause that followed, and Lady Otterbourne transferred herself to her other neighbour.

"Do you consider congratulations vulgar?" demanded Lady Tewkesbury of her host.

"Congratulations have entirely the character of the spirit in which they are offered," said Percy.

"Am I to conclude, then, that mine are vulgar?"

"That is not what I meant you to conclude."

Lady Tewkesbury leant forward.

"Tell me what you meant me to conclude," she said. "I am not stupid, and I will try to understand. But I rather think you are hard to understand. I always feel that you may have a surprise in your pocket for us all."

Percy thought of the letter in his pocket which had been such a surprise to himself and laughed.

"I am delighted if you really think so," he said; "but I cannot conceive it to be true. For indeed I am very straightforward and obvious."

"I notice that people always refer to the things which I have not perceived as obvious," remarked Lady Tewkesbury with some asperity.

"Perhaps you are so fond of peeping round corners that you don't see what is straight in front of you."

Lady Tewkesbury shrugged her very white shoulders.

"I acknowledge that I prefer to look about for queer little traits in people, than to only observe what is patent to everybody. And, no doubt, from not caring to observe that, I often fail to."

"Ah; but who can tell what is patent and what is not?" said Percy. "To a certain extent we all wear masks, and the most cunning people of all are those who wear a mask which is exactly like their own face. They would deceive the very elect."

"Whom do you mean by the very elect?"

"I mean you, Lady Tewkesbury."

I understand you less and less," said she. "But I promise myself that you will surprise me before I have known you a month longer."

Percy's face suddenly changed: for a moment he looked hunted and frightened. But he recovered himself.

"A month is a very short time," he said. "But if you are not to be disappointed, I must think and try to find out something surprising to do. People are so often surprised, yet it is so hard to think of anything new by which to surprise them. Do help me! Would you be surprised if I went and stood on my head in the corner?"

"O, dear no; I should only think that you were studying an artistic effect. Everyone tells me you are so artistic; and, of course, anything that artists do never surprise one."

"Then how is it that you promise yourself that I shall surprise you before a month is up?" asked Percy.

"Did I say that? Yes; I believe I did," she replied. "The only explanation is that you will do something very obvious and expected, which, as an artist we should not have expected you to do."

Percy laughed.

"You got out of it fairly well," he said; "but you had to have recourse to subtleties. For I assure you that I am entirely and completely obvious."

"Then Sybil is an even luckier girl than I had imagined," said she. "But I don't believe it."

"You don't believe what? That Sybil is luckier than you supposed. That is ambiguous."

"You are incorrigible. No, that you are completely obvious."

"But why if that is so, should Sybil be luckier than you thought," he asked.

"Because she could always count on you."

"And you, not believing that, do not believe that I am always to be counted on. There is another opportunity for a subtlety, if you are to get prettily out of it."

"I could if I wanted," said she. "And I won't try."

"A Parthian retreat," said Percy.

"No, I have no arrows to shoot at you as I run. But tell me one thing. You said that compliments took their colour from the spirit in which they were made. Give my compliments their quality!"

Percy replied without hesitation.

"Sincerity," he said.

Lady Otterbourne caught the last word.

"Sincerity is one of the seven deadly virtues," she said, with a certain dignity.

"And insincerity one of the seven living vices?" suggested Percy turning to her.

"One of the seven essential vices," she corrected him.

"And the other six?" he asked.

"Really, Percy, it is not polite of you to ask me for a list of the vices," she said. "Ask my sister; she knows more than I."

"I want the other six essential vices," he said turning to her.

"There are more than six," said Lady Tewkesbury.

"Six will do. One ought to be able to get on with six."

"It is easy to give you six: wanting what you have not got; not valuing what you have; speaking well of your enemies before their faces; speaking evil of your friends behind their backs; reading the papers; going to the Royal Academy."

Percy laughed.

"That is sufficient," he said, "to last a whole season. They might even last two, with a little care. Will those do?" and he turned to Lady Otterbourne.

"Yes, very well. But they are the vices of women."

'Tell me the vices of men."

"Ask Sybil a month from now," said Lady Otterbourne, laughing. "Am I to show the way? I see every one has finished."

The men soon came out, and a few minutes afterwards the first rocket went up. Percy was desirous of two things only, to talk to Sybil and to let the hours pass. More than once during dinner had the great doubt came upon him, and he felt exhausted with the effort of repelling it. Sybil alone could do that effectually, and it was impossible to see Sybil this evening to tell her all that that horrible

letter contained. Besides, though he was sure in his own mind that he knew what he would do, he had not definitely stated it yet even to himself. He would have to read the letter through again, he would have to din the utmost truth of it into his mind.

The fireworks lasted about an hour, and were received with immense enthusiasm by the tenants, especially the last, where Sybil's initials and his own were brought together to form a monogram. At the sight of that once again Percy's doubt rose and clutched at his throat, and once again he thrust it away.

It was not long afterwards that the ladies went upstairs, and Percy, pleading fatigue, left the men in the billiard room and went upstairs also. Lord Stoakley was standing in the hall by the tray of whisky-and-soda, and as Percy passed through and said, "Good night," he stopped for a moment.

"Do you know what was in the sealed envelope?" he asked.

Lord Stoakley nodded.

"Yes, my dear Percy. There was a paper left for the executors alone, to enable them to carry on the business. We were strictly forbidden to mention the matter to you until to-day. Are you very much upset about it?"

"Yes," said Percy, blankly.

"Come and talk to Mr. Sale and me before we go to-morrow morning," said the other. "We thought

probably that you would want to part the connection; though the fact that it has been carried on so long without any one knowing to whom it belonged, is a factor on the other side. Still you will probably desire to stop it."

Percy suddenly threw back his head and laughed loudly and unnaturally.

"Yes, that is probable," he said. "If only that were all. Is it possible that you do not see the hideousness of the thing?"

Lord Stoakley looked at him gravely for a moment.

"Percy, promise me you will do nothing in a hurry," he said with anxiety in his voice. "Now, perhaps, you take an exaggerated view of it all. That is of course natural; but cease to be exaggerated before you act."

"I will promise you that," said Percy. "Indeed, I do not see in what direction it is possible to exaggerate the truth of this."

He went up to his room at the top of the house, lit several candles, and sat down in the chair where he had read the letter. He drew it out of his pocket and read it again; then he poked the fire, and, as on the night before, he sat down and stared at the burning coals and communed with them.

"Samuelson, of Jermyn Street! That was what he was—a money-lender! That and Appleton's and Gore's—how exquisitely ironical was Fate! To think that in August last he had promised to

pay a debt of Lady Otterbourne's with crushing interest, and that he would pay it on October the fifteenth to himself! To think that when he approached them on the subject of cutting short the renewal, he had only approached himself. After his interview with the elder Mr. Samuelson he had felt unclean; to have dealings with that sort of man left a stain on one. That sort of man was what he was himself! To think that all his wealth, all that the world envied him for, was derived from similar transactions! In what disgust and heartfelt loathing he had held those vampires and bloodsuckers of improvident people! Who was the chief of them? Again himself! The house he entertained his friends in, the wine they drank, the food they ate, the millions that bought all these things, where did they come from? From Samuelson, of Jermyn Street! Here was he, young, ardent, fastidious, nurtured in luxury, with power to buy all he envied in the way of beautiful things! From where did that power come? To whom did he owe his education, his boots, his hat? To Samuelson, of Jermyn Street!"

For a moment his old habit of standing aloof from himself, of becoming his own spectator, reasserted itself. How completely dramatic was the climax, as far as it had hitherto developed. It was a Sophoclean tragedy without even the ambiguous warning of the oracle. Till this evening he had been utterly ignorant and innocent of the source of

this gathered gold. No honest and struggling man enveloped in his toils could have reproached him, no one could have besought his mercy, for none, not even himself, knew what he had been doing. So far, the climax was totally unexpected, as sudden as lightning, and admirably set. He was overtaken on his birthday night and on the eve of his marriage by this horrible discovery. The scene had closed on it, and he was alone again. The next scene would open in twelve hours. He was very anxious to know what the great Drama of life had in store for him. The main features of his own part, in so far as they depended on himself, he knew pretty well.

He had come away from his guests in order to think over the great step which he was determined to take to-morrow, and the consequences of that step. In a word, he was going to give up every penny of his grandfather's money which had been acquired in this horrible way. If it was possible, he would find out what was his grandfather's fortune before he took to money-lending; he would add to that his mother's fortune, and that he would keep. Samuelson's, Appleton's, and Gore's should cease to be. If necessary he would pension off the business managers, he would get places for the clerks, he would close the offices, thereby forfeiting his income, he would realize all the investments, worth, Mr. Sale had told him, about three million pounds, give the money either *en bloc* to found

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"Tell me what you meant me to conclude," she said. "I am not stupid, and I will try to understand. But I rather think you are hard to understand. I always feel that you may have a surprise in your pocket for us all."

Percy thought of the letter in his pocket which had been such a surprise to himself and laughed.

"I am delighted if you really think so," he said; "but I cannot conceive it to be true. For indeed I am very straightforward and obvious."

"I notice that people always refer to the things which I have not perceived as obvious," remarked Lady Tewkesbury with some asperity.

"Perhaps you are so fond of peeping round corners that you don't see what is straight in front of you."

Lady Tewkesbury shrugged her very white shoulders.

"I acknowledge that I prefer to look about for queer little traits in people, than to only observe what is patent to everybody. And, no doubt, from not caring to observe that, I often fail to."

"Ah; but who can tell what is patent and what is not?" said Percy. "To a certain extent we all wear masks, and the most cunning people of all are those who wear a mask which is exactly like their own face. They would deceive the very elect."

"Whom do you mean by the very elect?"

"I mean you, Lady Tewkesbury."

"I want the other six essential vices," he said turning to her.

"There are more than six," said Lady Tewkesbury.

"Six will do. One ought to be able to get on with six."

"It is easy to give you six: wanting what you have not got; not valuing what you have; speaking well of your enemies before their faces; speaking evil of your friends behind their backs; reading the papers; going to the Royal Academy."

Percy laughed.

"That is sufficient," he said, "to last a whole season. They might even last two, with a little care. Will those do?" and he turned to Lady Otterbourne.

"Yes, very well. But they are the vices of women."

'Tell me the vices of men."

"Ask Sybil a month from now," said Lady Otterbourne, laughing. "Am I to show the way? I see every one has finished."

The men soon came out, and a few minutes afterwards the first rocket went up. Percy was desirous of two things only, to talk to Sybil and to let the hours pass. More than once during dinner had the great doubt came upon him, and he felt exhausted with the effort of repelling it. Sybil alone could do that effectually, and it was impossible to see Sybil this evening to tell her all that that horrible

thus acquired was as necessary to him as breathing. Simply he could not possibly act otherwise. He could not even argue the question with her, and, indeed, on such a matter he had no arguments. With him it was a question of instinct, and irresistible. On the other hand, he could conceive a thousand admirable reasons for not giving up a penny of his fortune. In the first place the manner in which it had been acquired was altogether an agency outside him. He had not till to-day known it, and if he had known it he would have been powerless to stop it. Again, what money except money earned by the mere toil of the hands in useful and necessary trades, was altogether clean? All acquisition of property was immoral from this point of view, the stronger worsted the weaker, the clever the more stupid. Unless, as his grandfather said, you discovered a gold mine, and that, too, on your own property or on no one's property, every penny you made was made at the expense of others. All this he allowed, but it was absolutely powerless to alter his decision, or make it possible for him to contemplate its validity. Again, was he in no way to regard Sybil's desire? If she pleaded with him, how could he resist it? If she used cool and reasonable arguments how could he answer? He did not know; all he knew was that he could not do otherwise than he had determined.

There again, as only twenty-four hours ago, the [illegible] of burning coal faded and ceased to glow.

Once again, the half burned cinders clinked in the grate as the arch of half-consumed slag fell in, and Percy got up from his chair, and threw the window wide. It was a glorious night, the September moon shed a flood of ivory-coloured light over the gardens and fields. It was swung high in the sky and a little behind the house, so that a great square of shadow was cast by the huge building over the nearer lawns. The Triton fountain tinkled in the stillness, and the wind was hushed. The utter want of sympathy between man and Nature never struck him more forcibly. Because his world was ready to fall about his ears, not a whit of the loveliness of night, with the trees sleeping in the moonlight and the noise of falling water from the darkness, was abated. The great serene Mother had no time or inclination to listen to his puny questionings.

Then, with a sudden great wave of shame, he definitely cast his doubt aside. He had been doubting Sybil, no less—he had been committing treason to her. She had promised herself to him. Was not that enough? And his loyalty and his love to her shouted the affirmative.

He had a moment before thought that Nature was cold and unsympathetic. Indeed, she was far otherwise. She sympathized not at all, it is true, with his weak, timorous doubtings, but where could he have found a more perfect symbol of his love for Sybil or Sybil's for him than this flood of light, full

not of the strength of violence and effort, but full of the strength that is more than these, the strength of stillness, which is above all effort and striving.

To-morrow he would tell Sybil all. He would confess and ask her pardon for the wrong he had done her in his thoughts, and say that which must surely have sprung into her mind as instinctively as it had sprung into his, that they must give all this up, without demur or reservation.

Percy turned from the window and undressed. He had conquered; that of him which was best and truest had vanquished his doubts. But he deserved his penance for his treason, and would confess it to Sybil. And he went to bed and slept.

CHAPTER XIV.

Sybil Decides.

THE weather seemed disposed, in spite of Percy's momentary accusations of its want of sympathy with the puny creature known as Man, to continue to pay its congratulations to his coming of age. The next morning dawned bright, cool and invigorating; a more perceptible hint of frost was in the air, and the exquisite, indefinable smell of an autumn morning. The beeches, earliest of the trees to wear their red and yellow liveries, were already beginning to put on the gorgeousness of their brief colouring. Thrushes scudded across the lawn, and broke into a perfect torrent of repeated melody as they found and devoured their breakfast; and rooks, with feathers so shiny that they looked as if they must have been lately blacked and polished, strode like soldiers over the meadows below. The guests were all, with the exception of Lady Otterbourne and Sybil, to leave by morning trains, and the breakfast at half-past nine mustered a full complement.

Percy had awoke that morning with a strange feeling of having escaped from some mortal danger, and Blessington, next door, heard him singing in his bath, an indubitable mark of un-

clouded spirits; and, indeed, his song did not belie him. He found himself rid of the intolerable doubts of the evening before, and in the relief occasioned by the removal of such a burden, it is soberly true that he gave not a thought to the matter of the sealed letter. His fortune he regarded as gone, and might all ill go with it! For a few hours it had been his, and those few hours had contained for him the worst moments of his life, when, the evening before, he had wrestled with his doubts. To-day he no longer regarded it as his, for his determination was fixed. It had been made excitedly, but in the cool morning he found it cool and stable. That change in his worldly prospects, enormous as it might seem to others, weighed at the present moment nothing to him in comparison with his fixed conviction that Sybil was no less his than before. In the wonderful truth of that every other circumstances of life seemed to him valueless and without colour. Looking at his own life and environment as he would have looked at a picture, it seemed to him that the great flood of light (Sybil, no less) which covered it, drowned all details in a luminous haze. The picture was dazzling to look upon, he could only discern broad outlines. The details it would be his business to examine now, but his waking thoughts that morning gave him no uneasiness in their regard. Nothing could be wrong while that glorious sunshine flooded his heart.

It was not yet mid-day when the last of his guests drove to the station, leaving him alone with Sybil and her mother. He had asked Lord Stoakley and Mr. Sale to dine with him that night in London, as he had affairs of importance to talk over with them. Both guessed more or less completely what these affairs were, and Lord Stoakley at least felt somewhat dismayed when he saw that Sybil was waiting till later. He urged Percy to put off any talk with her till he had discussed the matter with his executors, but he with a radiant face had refused. He only succeeded in getting from the young man a promise that he would do nothing rashly. If he had known what a different idea Percy attached to the word, he would not have taken his departure even in comparative ease of mind.

Sybil and her mother were waiting for him in the hall as he saw his last guests off.

"Well, Percy, we remain," said Lady Otterbourne, "and you have to prove to us that your affair is of more importance than the dressmakers."

"I think you will agree with me," said Percy. "Let us go into the library. Oh, it is God's own morning!"

They went in silence up the corridor and turned into the library. The sun was shining in at the window and he drew down the blinds a little. Then standing in front of them, he spoke, smiling, at ease, confident.

"I have read my grandfather's sealed letter," he said. "I read it directly after I left you last night, Sybil, before dinner. At first I was horrified, disgusted; and I think last night at dinner I was almost light-headed because I knew what I had to do, and it seemed difficult. But this morning I hardly think of that at all, I have got my focus again. But, indeed, it would be rather absurd if I thought of anything except one thing."

And he stretched out his hand to Sybil.

She was looking at him with a sort of puzzled intentness. She gave her hand to him, and he held it while he continued:

"Yes, it was terrible at first, and it was the more terrible because the devil tempted me and I doubted you, Sybil. No, you do not understand yet. Wait. I will make myself quite plain."

Again he looked at her; but her eye caught his only for a moment, for she turned her head and gave one penetrating glance at her mother. Lady Otterbourne, busy with her own thoughts, did not notice Sybil, and only frowned impatiently at Percy.

"Go on, dear Percy," she said. "Go on."

There was something in the impatience and suspense of her face that startled him. She looked like a woman who expects to have terrible revelations made her. From her he glanced back to Sybil, whose hand still lay in his. He pressed it gently, and did not notice how mechanical was the pressure she returned.

"Yes, I have begun in the middle," he said. "Look, here is the beginning. My grandfather's sealed communication told me the history of his fortune. He made his money, three million pounds, as you know, by money-lending. He did not use his own name in the business. And one of the houses was Gore's, another was Appleton's, and the third was Samuelson's."

Lady Otterbourne suddenly gave a little gasp, and Sybil turned to her.

"What is it, mother?" she asked. "What is it?"

Percy looked at Lady Otterbourne in silence a moment.

"Yes, of Jermyn Street," he said.

"What is it, mother?" asked Sybil again.

"Nothing!" said Lady Otterbourne. "Go on, Percy."

Percy paused, chilled and disappointed. He had pictured to himself that Sybil at this point would look at him with a moment's transitory horror, and then with pure pity. "Oh, poor Percy!" he had imagined her saying, with swift womanlike intuition, "but what does it matter if we are not rich?" But Sybil did nothing of the sort. When her mother did not answer her question, she looked back at him, and withdrew her hand. For a moment the doubt again assailed him. It was a bad omen.

"Yes, it is awful, Percy," she said, in a cool, dry

voice. "But I imagine no one knows. And is there any reason why anybody should? Are you thinking of shutting up the businesses? I hope you won't do anything in a hurry. Was that what Lord Stoakley meant when he asked you to do nothing rashly? We must think it all over."

He stood there looking at her blankly, and she saw she had made a mistake.

"Dear Percy," she went on, "it is terrible for you. I know how you must feel it. Perhaps you are right, for I see what you mean to do: to have no more at all to do with the thing. But you will talk to Lord Stoakley and Mr. Sale first, will you not? Will you forfeit much if——" and she stopped.

Percy sat down.

"Is that all you have to say, Sybil?" he asked.

"All? No! I have a great deal to say. But you are so queer, Percy. I never know——" and again she stopped helplessly.

Lady Otterbourne recovered from her stupor of a moment, and became a hard, clever woman again.

"Sybil, you are quite intolerably stupid," she said, sharply. "Do you not see? Percy, you are wrong. You are meaning to do an absurd thing. And"—she spoke with slow emphasis—"you do not know what it may lead to."

Sybil looked frightened.

"I do not understand," she said, helplessly. "What are you meaning to do, Percy?"

"He is meaning to give everything up, of course," said Lady Otterbourne. "Really, Sybil, at times you are extraordinarily slow. He intends to give up everything that came from this money-lending business. What proportion does that bear to the whole, Percy?"

Percy kicked a footstool aside. For the moment he felt perfectly hard and businesslike.

"I don't know yet," he said. "I have not yet troubled to enquire exactly what my grandfather was worth before he went into this; but of this I am sure, that, instead of being a rich man, I shall be rather poor. That is a detail at present. It will be necessary for me, for instance, to give up this house; to sell it or let it again. This certainly will be out of proportion to my means. I daresay I shall have two or three thousand a year."

Lady Otterbourne got up with a quick movement, as if closing the interview.

"It is impossible," she said, quickly. "You may take it from me that it is altogether impossible. I am against it altogether. My poor boy, you don't know what it means; you have no conception how unhappy and worried for money it is possible to be on that sort of income. Besides you have not only yourself to think for."

Percy looked at Sybil, not listening to Lady Otterbourne's words—hardly, indeed, hearing them. She had fixed her eyes on the carpet and was staring at it intently. He was stung suddenly by an intol-

erable pain, and felt himself helpless in the grip of it.

"Sybil, speak!" he cried. "Tell me that you agree with me! How can I do anything else?"

Sybil raised her eyes.

"I cannot tell you that," she said calmly, "because I disagree with you altogether. What you are proposing to do is out of the question. It is as mamma says," she went on with gathering energy. "You are not alone in this. Do you not consider me at all? It is impossible I should live in that sort of way. How often have you told me that yourself, Percy? How often you have told me that I was born to all that is splendid and magnificent! I will not allow you to do this. You shall not. Cut off all connection with these houses if you will: sell them, realise: I do not know what you call it. Even that would be quixotic, and to me absurd. But the other——! You think only of yourself; you are selfish!"

For one moment Percy could not believe that the words he heard uttered in that cold, calm voice were Sybil's. He thought he must be the victim of some gigantic hoax that his ears were playing him. It was impossible that she could have spoken so! Lady Otterbourne, standing by the chimney-piece, said nothing, and in the pause that followed Percy found himself just staring blankly in front of him, without thought, and stunned. At last Lady Otterbourne spoke.

"You had better go away, Sybil," she said; "I want to talk it over quietly with Percy."

At that he looked at her.

"Why should Sybil go?" he asked. "It is a matter that concerns her; the matter concerns us equally."

"It will be better," said Lady Otterbourne, nodding to Sybil. "I want to talk to you alone. You shall see Sybil again afterwards. Go, Sybil."

"Sybil shall do as she pleases," broke in Percy.

"Certainly," said Lady Otterbourne, icily. "Which will you do, Sybil? You shall please yourself, as Percy says."

"I will go," she said.

She went out of the library and down the corridor to the room that had been Percy's mother's and that was to be hers. Her microscopic soul, not large enough for two emotions at a time, nor even for one fine one, was in a tumult. She was lost in agitated self-pity and dismay. She was furious with Percy, though she hardly yet believed that he was serious. He was mad, he was a lunatic to contemplate such a thing. It was inconceivable that he should do it. It must be stopped. She would urge him, entreat him, she would even—yes, she would even threaten him. How could she think that it was possible for her to let him do this? He loved her—good: let him show his love, not by sacrificing himself, but by refusing to sacrifice her. He spoke of giving up Abbotsworthy as if that was a thing

easily done, a matter of no moment. She could not contemplate that and all that it implied. As for the threat, she did not soberly believe that it would be necessary to use that. Percy was not a fool; he must see that he was contemplating an impossible thing. As she swept up and down the room, the smallness of her tremendous agitation was almost sublime.

Meantime Lady Otterbourne was having her talk with Percy. She was somewhere about ten times as clever as Sybil; and, certainly, her method was ingenious, considering how unexpected the crisis had been and how impossible to foresee. As soon as Sybil had left the room, she advanced to him and held out her hand.

"Percy," she said, "I honour you for your idea. It is like you. Come, let us talk it over quietly. Sybil, poor child, was so upset that she was quite nonsensical. You must not regard what she said. I could have boxed her ears when she called you selfish."

Poor Percy caught wildly at any hope.

"Oh, thank you, thank you," he said. "But don't blame Sybil: I broke it to her too violently; it was stupid of me. But you see, do you not, how it is with me? The money is vile; it is a filthy thing, acquired villainously. It is no question of choice with me: the thing has to be done; it has all to be given up. Do you not see the horror of the thing? Think only of one instance—yourself.

It has been I who gave you all that worry and trouble in the summer over your debt. It is I who was bleeding you. What would have happened if you had not come to me? There are hundreds like you, whom I have been pressing and grinding down, or I should not be so rich. Any night at dinner I may sit next a woman from whom I wring the money to keep up this house. Samuelson, of Jermyn Street! Here he is."

Percy flung his hands apart, and stood looking at Lady Otterbourne with wide eyes and parted mouth. For one flashing moment she caught something of this thought which so covered him with shame, the next her habitual self resumed its sway. But she had seen how deep-rooted his resolve was, and, though she went on calmly enough, the fear that she was fighting a losing battle suggested itself.

"Do not say those things, Percy," she said. "It is horrible, no doubt; but at the thought of you and Sybil I cannot at this moment bring myself to regard anything else as of consequence. And now, Percy, I want you to give me your very best attention. As I said, and as I repeat, I honour you for the impulse which makes you feel as if you can keep nothing of what was got by the money-lending. But you have to look at the question from all sides. At present you have only looked at it from one, you have only considered it in the light of your natural repugnance. It would be strange if you did not feel it. Yes, I know, Sybil did not, but

you must be indulgent: she was terribly upset at it all. The money, as you so rightly say, is dirtied; filthy you called it, I think. But Sybil, was there nothing in what Sybil said?—though of course the poor child was very wild and exaggerated. Have you thought of her?"

"I never thought it possible that she would disagree with me," said Percy. "I was bitterly and cruelly disappointed. I imagined that she must see the question as I saw it, and as you see it!" he added.

"You are right when you say that I see it as you do," said Lady Otterbourne. "I see it fully from your point of view, but I also see it from other points of view as well."

"There can be no other point of view," said Percy, hotly. "And if I, to whom this all belongs, see only the side which means to me so great a loss, is not that enough?"

"It would be enough if you were alone in the matter," said Lady Otterbourne. "But you are not. You must consider Sybil."

"I will talk to Sybil," said Percy, eagerly. "I will persuade her that I am right."

"You will try, of course," said Lady Otterbourne; "I have no objection to that."

"You think I shall not move her?" said Percy.

"I am sure you will not."

"What then?" he asked.

"It is to be hoped that she will persuade you," she said.

"That I am sure she will not," said he. "And again what then?"

Lady Otterbourne hated these direct unveiled questions. She was not naturally an unkindly woman, and she wanted, not only to persuade Percy, but to spare him pain.

"You will have to ask Sybil about that," she said.

"Will not Sybil be guided by you?"

"I shall not attempt to influence her," said Lady Otterbourne.

"That is not kind to me."

"You wrong me," she said; "it is the greatest kindness I could do you. If I attempted to influence Sybil, my influence would not be directed in the way you hope."

"You agree with her then, that I am wrong."

"Yes," she said. "As I told you, I admire your impulse; but, as I tell you now, your action is utterly impracticable. You would be mad to give up, especially when you are utterly innocent, a princely fortune because it was made in ways which you do not approve of. I, by one of those curious coincidences which are so common, know more of the ways of money-lenders than you. They are extortionate, grasping, and it is a nefarious trade. But the people to blame are those who, like myself, have been willing to satisfy their demands. All

mankind makes money at the expense of other people, and it is only because they do so in what I may call an elemental manner, without any of those softening pretexts which conceal the bare facts, that you think as you do. Supposing your grandfather had been a great lawyer. If you consider that closely you would find that he must then have made a quantity of money by successfully defending guilty people and also by his ingenious attacks on others who in his heart he believed to be innocent. That is not a pretty trade if you look closely at it. Yet the law is an honourable profession."

Percy shook his head.

"It is not the same thing," he said.

"When you run it to the ground it is," she replied, "and if you think over it, you will agree with me. But all that after all is a very minor point. You have pledged your word to marry Sybil, and you have promised to make her, as far as in you lies, a happy woman. It is therefore impossible for you to do this. What sort of a poor man's wife would she make? It is not enough that you are in love with each other. Ordinary daily intercourse will not exist on such a diet. Do you think she would have consented to marry you if you had been poor? Do not reply obviously and untruly, and say: 'Was it then for my wealth that she promised to marry me?' Of course it was not. But it was necessary for her, as she felt, and as I

felt, to marry a man out of a certain circle, a man with wealth and position. When a princess marries a man of royal blood, is it that she loves her husband only because he is royal? Of course it is not, though she could not marry anyone who was not royal."

Percy had lit a cigarette and was blowing smoke rings apparently with unconcerned carelessness. Lady Otterbourne knew, however, that his undivided attention was hers.

"I will not remind you of what the world will think," she went on, "because I don't suppose you care a pin what the world will think. But what you must consider is that you are not alone. I do not wish to say unpleasant things; but what I have told you about Sybil is true. She cannot be a poor man's wife. Consequently you must give up your idea."

Percy suddenly broke out into a laugh.

"I am sure that you believe that what you say is true," he said; "but to me it is comic and incredible. Do you seriously believe that Sybil will give me up? You see, I can laugh at the idea. Last night, it is true, I was beset by a hundred vague and maddening doubts. I wronged her, so I believe, utterly and horribly. Again and again, during this interview with you, they have beset me, and I have thrust them aside. I cling to my faith. Sybil give me up? I shall not even hint in the remotest manner to her that such a thing is possible. I shall listen

to what she has to say about this matter with my best attention, for that is due to her, as I have listened to you. But you have failed to convince me altogether. You have in no way shaken me. I cannot—it is physically impossible for me—to use the money that has been got in such a manner. I am ready and willing to be convinced if I can be convinced. You have tried. Sybil shall try. I am not doing an easy thing, but I am doing what seems to me an inevitable one."

He stood up as he spoke, and threw away the end of his cigarette. Inconceivable as his resolve was to her, and fervently as she hoped that she and Sybil would be able to make him abandon it, Lady Otterbourne could not help feeling a certain involuntary admiration for him. His belief that Sybil could, or even would, marry him if he gave his money up; his utter negligence of whether he would leave himself a competence or not; his reckless, unconsidered casting away of three millions of money, were foolish and absurd, it is true, but they were faults on the grand scale; and Lady Otterbourne, with all her limited horizon and her unlimited worldliness, was able to appreciate the grand scale, whether it manifested itself in breeding or morals or temperament. But it was not worth such sacrifices as these, and she spoke with regret and growing seriousness.

"A word more," she said. "You must consider that this revelation has but lately been made to

you; that you are stung and hurt by the blow. In a few days, or in a few weeks, it will get appreciably less; you will get used to it——"

"Ah! I do not want to get used to it," cried Percy, "nor is it possible for me to contemplate getting used to it. A course of crime makes one used to crimes, I daresay, but one does not advise it."

His words were exaggerated, and Lady Otterbourne seized on them.

"You are talking foolishly," she cried, "as if crime had anything to do with it. You are not human this morning; you do not recollect that you live in the world; you are like that terrible *Parsifal* we saw and argued about at Baireuth. What you say just shows that you are yet in no fit state to decide anything. Put your decision off, at any rate put it off for a month. Put the marriage off too, if you will."

She stopped suddenly; she had not meant to say quite that. It amounted almost to a threat, and anything of the nature of a threat she knew would only goad Percy on. She looked at him. He had grown suddenly white to the lips.

"Do I understand you, do you think?" he asked quietly.

"I am making myself very plain," she said in desperation, now the thing was done. "When you go to talk to Sybil you will see. Percy, I am speaking soberly, in order to warn you. She cannot

marry a poor man, and she will not. Do you want to wreck your happiness, to wreck hers? It is right to warn you: it may come to that."

Percy moved towards the door.

"It is no use putting anything off," he said. "I shall see Sybil at once; it is impossible that I should wait any longer without seeing her. I will come to you here again."

He left the library and went down the corridor to his mother's room. Sybil was sitting in the window-seat, with a very fixed, sharp look on her face. She had not heard Percy's step across the thick carpet, and he had already approached her when she saw him. He looked at her in piteous appeal.

"Sybil," he said, "Sybil!"

Sybil had spent a fruitless half-hour. She could not imagine what she should say to him. She rose, passed by him and shut the door into the corridor.

"Well," she said at length, "has mamma persuaded you? Have you given up that stupid, impossible idea? Oh, Percy," and a sudden anxiety struck her, "tell me you have given it up!"

Percy shook his head.

Sybil sat down in a chair and began to sob.

"Oh, you are cruel," she said. "You do not love me in the least. You care for nothing but your own pride. Perhaps you never loved me; for now, when you have an opportunity of doing something for me, you will not do it!"

"Sybil," cried Percy, in a sort of despair, "do you not understand? Can you not have mercy upon me? I cannot take the money. It would sicken and poison me. You do not know; but cannot you take my word for it that it is so? What does the money matter? I shall have enough; we shall be able to live comfortably; you will have as much as you have ever had. There will be——"

Percy paused; words seemed futile.

"Answer me!" he cried at length. "Your mother has frightened me horribly! Supposing I go my own way—supposing I give up all this hideous dross, will you or will you not give me up? God, that I should have to ask you that! But I am frightened; I don't know what I am saying!" His voice had risen almost to a scream, and he paused a moment and wiped from his forehead the dew of his anguish. Then, in a quieter tone, "So answer me, Sybil," he said, "and then forgive me for ever having asked you."

It seemed to him that he waited years for her to answer, that in the pause that followed he grew old and grey, and that his youth passed and was remembered by him only as a dream. He sat with his face buried in his hands, and heard only her sobbing and the metallic insistent ticking of the clock on the mantelpiece. She sobbed once, he noticed, for every three times that it ticked. And still she did not answer.

After a while he rose.

"You have nothing then to say to me," he asked, in a curious hard dry voice.

She said nothing; and Percy, bending, kissed her on the forehead and on the hair. Then he left the room.

Lady Otterbourne was in the corridor.

"I have asked Sybil," he said; "you had better go to her. She would not answer me. I asked her whether she would marry me if I gave up the money. She could not say she would. And I think you had better lunch in her room, and go up to town, as you arranged, directly after. I shall be at my flat in London. Please communicate with me there. If you do not, I shall know."

CHAPTER XV.

An Experiment.

A WEEK afterwards Percy was still in London, living alone at his flat. A short, bald paragraph had appeared in the daily press, between the movements of the German Emperor's yacht and the announcement of a new piece at the Lyceum, saying that his marriage with Lady Sybil Attwood would not take place. The world read it with a certain amount of interest, talked about it a little in the evening at its shooting-lodges in Scotland, and shrugged its shoulders when it learned the reason for the rupture.

Percy, meantime, since he left Abbotsworthy, had stupefied himself with work in company with Mr. Sale; and that rubicund little gentleman was worn to a shadow of himself. By the end of a week they had got through the bulk of the demolition: the three businesses had been broken up, the three managers had been handsomely pensioned, and Samuelson's, Appleton's and Gore's were no more. Percy had gone into the smallest details with great attention, and dwelt with a sort of incredulous horror on the methods by which he had been made rich. Sometimes he used to wonder whether, if Sybil had known as much as Lady

Otterbourne or himself about the trade, she would have thought that there was anything more than madness at the root of his action. But he did not encourage such speculations, and for the present gave himself no time for regrets or grief. Tired at the end of each day, he slept well, and shortened the waking moments by getting up as soon as he was called. The outstanding debts from various people who had borrowed money he had called in, taking, however, only the original principal with interest at 4 instead of 60 per cent.; and the total sum he had given anonymously to about a dozen national institutions, for the most part hospitals. The residue, consisting of his father's original fortune and the money left him by his mother, was found to amount to about a hundred and twenty thousand pounds; and, consequently, he was still very comfortably off, and had to make no change whatever in his personal expenses. But had it been otherwise he would have treated any result with perfectly unassumed indifference. Abbotsworthy had been put up for sale, and there was already a possible purchaser for it, namely Mr. Carnegie, who had apparently at last decided to settle down in England, and leave the United States. It was even supposed also that he was engaged to be married; but this had been supposed so often, that no one paid much attention to it.

During this week Percy hardly knew whether he suffered or not. Suffering, it seemed to him,

was not the right word for the coldness and utter indifference to everything that sat in his heart. Since he parted with Sybil and Lady Otterbourne at Abbotsworthy, he had seen Sybil not at all, and her mother only once. The interview had been hopeless and useless, and when it was over he thought that he would have been wiser not to have seen her. She came, she told him, not from Sybil, but on her own responsibility, to ask him whether there was any chance of his reconsidering what he had proposed to do. But already he had begun the division and distribution of his property, and even if he had not, he could not have promised her the faintest chance of his changing. He did not even ask after Sybil, and half wondered to himself whether a sort of necrotic process had set in in his heart.

Suddenly the whole of the last six months had passed in his mind into a state of utter unreality. He had been worshipping, so he told himself, a dream-like creation of his own, and at a moment when Sybil showed her real self to him she ceased to be real at all. She had broken his dream, and wakened him into reality: it was morning, and hard light streamed in at the windows. He had imagined a beautiful soul, a fit inhabitant of her peerless body, and he had found that from that splendid shell there looked out a spirit that was false and base and utterly untrue. In a moment the fabric of his dream had been shattered, and he

was left not with a regret, but a dreary wonder which mocked him that he had been so deceived. In a day he seemed to have lived with his disillusionment a lifetime.

At present he made no plans of any kind; as long as the work of the disposal of his property lasted he merely lived as from day to day, through a succession of busy hours. He had already got two months' leave from the Foreign Office, and he supposed, for he did not intend anything, that he should spend them in London alone. Ernest Fellowes had seen him once when he heard the news, but he had been unable to help or stir him in any way. Simply he had been grossly deceived, and he declined for the present to have anything more to do with the world. The game no longer interested him, and he stood aside, without complaint, but contemptuous. Blanche Stoakley had not tried to see him, but she had written to him, and the note showed at any rate that she understood him.

"I hear you are in London," she said; "but as you wish to see no one, I will not come. Let me know, however, if at any future time I can in any way help you. You have been crully deceived. I daresay you are right to be by yourself; anyhow that is your instinct, which I do not want to question. We come up to London soon after Christmas; till then we are at Langton. Oh, Percy, Percy! . . ."

One morning—the first on which his attendance was not necessary at Mr. Sale's office—Percy, having breakfasted, strolled to the window and looked out on the street. The traffic up and down St. James' poured by in a ceaseless stream, and the pavements were crowded. A thin drizzle was falling from a sky which was yellowish-gray and unluminous, like a jaundiced skin, and the tone of the streets exactly matched that sombre hue of overhead. The wooden pavement was greasy and yellow; umbrellas, without visible reason for their movement as seen from above, bobbed and jolted past his window, black and shining with the fine rain: the whole view was an apotheosis of sordid, unrelieved gloom. Percy could not invent an extra detail which should make the scene more dreary, nor could he see a single object which gave it any brightness. Horses, cabs, people, sky, pavement, were grouped into one masterpiece, the title of which might have been "Hopeless." Certainly the flames of the pit would be less terrible than an eternity of St. James' Street on such a morning. As he looked a horse of an omnibus which was passing down the street slipped and fell, and was dragged on a few yards by the impetus of the vehicle. It struggled gallantly to regain its feet; but it seemed doubtful if it could, when the driver, with a sudden savage lash of his whip, gave it the necessary effort. Percy turned back into his room with a shudder; that one touch had completed the

picture. He wondered whether his own driver would soon lash him to his feet again. At present he felt that he was between the shafts and lying on the pavement.

A small fire was burning in his grate, and he lit a cigarette and looked at the cheerful flapping flames for a minute or two. Suddenly a phrase from the letter of his grandfather came unbidden into his mind, and he repeated it aloud. "La consolation des arts," he said; "La consolation des arts." He rose from his chair and walked up and down the room. A flicker of interest, momentary it might be, had come into his mind, and he remembered that it was at least ten days since he had been interested in anything; it was as if a thrush had suddenly trilled a bar of song, or as if a child had laughed. Several years ago he had come across the phrase in a book of Gautier's, and for a moment it had arrested him. Then he remembered that his grandfather had quoted the phrase, assigning it to Flaubert, and to satisfy himself he took down the volume of Gautier where it occurred and verified it. On first reading it he remembered that he had felt unable to decide whether the idea it contained was merely a truism, or whether on the other hand it was not true at all. Obviously there was much to be got from beautiful things, none knew that better than he; on the other hand, he remembered wondering whether in time of great mental distress the arts would be found to administer any

alleviation or opiate. The only instance he could think of within his personal experience was in the reading of old volumes of *Punch* while waiting in the dentist's consulting-room, and the consolation they had afforded him had been of the slightest.

He had not consciously come across the phrase again till his last birthday, when he met it in his grandfather's letter. At the time he had not paid any particular attention to it; but now, when it again sprang into his mind, it was strangely arresting. For what after all were the great and the real things in life? What warrant was there for supposing that a bitter or even a broken heart was more intolerable than a disappointment of the intellect or of the artistic sense? If one of the supreme painters of the world had ever had to choose between his wife and his sense of line and colour, and had decided to sacrifice the latter, would the tragedy of his own life be less that way than the other? And if, without his choice, his affections were disappointed, would he not be thrice and four times a madman not to fling himself into the other passion which had been given him? A passion for a woman might last a year or ten years, even twenty, but the force and splendour of the passion must inevitably pale and weaken. How different it was with an artist who lived at the white-hot temperature! The longer he worshipped his divine mistress, the more passionately loving his worship became!

In life one harsh event might mar a dozen lovely

years, its poison staining backwards as well as forwards. In Art no such catastrophe could be possible, nothing could hurt or dim what had once been fair.

Percy paused in his walk round his room, and looked up at the walls. The dreamy child's face by Greuze which hung over his writing-table was no less lovely than it had ever been; the terra-cotta from Tanagra had lost none of its grace, its pose was as perfect as ever; and the under sides of the leaves of the trees which overhung the waterfall in his little Turner water-colour, bright and illuminated from the reflection of the sun on the water, were no less delicate, no less finely observed or accurately executed. The tragedies of life did not touch Art: whatever events might take place in that blind, hazardous, rough-and-tumble affair, here was a sanctuary which could not be violated, where the breath of morning was ever cool and there were trees for the stress of noonday. Sybil had deceived him, or, as he was quite ready to admit, he had deceived himself, and that deception had spoiled and destroyed his pleasure in people. Life seemed crude and cruel: its violence had battered and beaten him. But what if his refuge was here?

Again, to take the collective experience of the race, what, to anyone who possessed an artistic sense, were the greatest tragedies and the greatest triumphs of which the world had known? Certain of them no doubt were events taking place on the

theatre of life, acted by living men and women; but were there not others, events which had never taken place, the fruit of mind and imaginations, which could not be called less real, which were as important an ingredient in the dose of consciousness which we are given every morning as anything which actually happened during the day? About certain crises in the history of the world, historians were still in doubt whether they actually took place or not, but what did that matter if Art had touched them? Their historical truth did not affect their reality. If it could be proved that Helen of Troy never lived, if Agamemnon was only a creation of Homer, if excavation showed that Troy was only a third-rate village in an unimportant corner of Asia Minor, would that make the *Iliad* less real? Who cared whether Hamlet was a historical or a real person? What did it matter whether Shakespeare owed anything to tedious chronicles or not? Hamlet was real to him, Percy Gerard, not because he had actually lived and eaten mutton and feigned (or not feigned) madness, but because the art of Shakespeare had made him real. Should we not lose more if Shakespeare was lost to the world than we should gain if we found a contemporary and unimpeachable account of Macbeth, and a police-court record of the murder? What was our inheritance from the Greeks? Not the inventions, not even the patriotic examples of the Athenians at Marathon, or the Spartans at Thermopylæ, but a

few marble busts and pots, a few statuettes and vases, a few prints.

[illegible] became suddenly luminous. It seemed to be a vision to him, and it became true, a workable and practical statement of fact. Percy felt as if he had been dead and the hour of resurrection was on him. Because he had been deceived, or because he had deceived himself in a woman, he had thought that nothing was good, nothing was true, and he had pronounced that the world and all that it contained was not worth an empty nut. He had had a smash, and he had no intention of letting such a thing be possible again, but in the flowers that surrounded him he found that a whole vaggonful of the things of life had not had a scratch. The whole realm of Art was as fair as it had ever been, the sun shone there with undiminished brilliance, there were no greasy pavements there on which one could slip and fall and be lashed to one's feet again. To Art St. James' Street was merely a geographical expression, and Art knew nothing and cared less about geography.

A timid tap came to the door and Blessington entered. Percy had written to her on his arrival in London, saying that he had lost his money and that Abbotsworthy had to be sold. If she wished to stop there, he would try to get the purchaser, whoever he might be, to let her continue in her present place. But if not, why there was still himself to be

looked after, and if she would come and pour out his tea for him in London, it would be quite like old days again. Or again, she might retire and live comfortably on her annuity. In all his bitterness and disgust of life, his tenderness for his old nurse had never for a moment left him, and when, the day after, she had arrived, tremulous and tearful, he had for the only time broken down and had sobbed with his head on her knee as if he had been a little boy again.

"I thought I'd look in, Master Percy, and see how you are this morning," said the old lady. "And it is such a wet dark day, I hope you won't think of going out."

"I must take care a gypsy doesn't put me under her cloak and run away with me," said Percy, with a suddenly brightened eye.

This was an old joke, founded on a supposed fear of Blessington's when Percy was out late fishing in the river at Abbotsworthy, or running about the park, and she received it with a beaming face.

"Why, you look better this morning," she said. "It's the camomile tea I gave you."

"And I am better, Blessington," he replied; "but I can't stop in. I'm going to the British Museum."

"That's too far off on such a bad day; pray-a-do stop in by your nice fire," said Blessington, who had not the slightest idea where the British Museum was. "But I thought I'd look in to see how you were, and if you won't get some young gentlemen

to have dinner with you to-night, for a little company."

Percy considered.

"Yes, I think I will write a note," he said.

It was very short, and he addressed it to Fellowes:

"Come and dine to-night," he said; "I am going to the British Museum, to go on with the gems. I have discovered something this morning, and it has done me a world of good—'La consolation des arts.' Gautier said it."

He had been studying gems when, less than a year ago, Sybil came into his life, and he got down from his shelves the British Museum catalogue with which he had been working. He had had it interleaved, and the pages were strewn with notes concerning the technique and workmanship of certain gems in that collection. As he turned over the pages, he felt the little spark of interest which Gautier's four words had lit up in him begin to glow like charcoal that is fanned, and taking a hansom he drove off to Bloomsbury. He had obtained permission there to have certain cases opened for him, and he went straight to the superb head of Alexander cut on an orange-coloured sard, and, giving the custodian his card, asked to have the case opened. Jeweller's work had always a great attraction for him; in the finest examples it was finished beyond

the power of the eye to follow, and the work itself was executed in the most imperishable and most precious materials. Those rows of luminous sards —set *à jour* in dark velvet—of all tints from the palest yellow to pigeon's blood, those amethysts faded and rendered more than half opaque with age, the wonderful contrast between the cold white ground of the sardonyx and the superincumbent translucency of the orange stratum,—where in the world could you find natural beauty so apotheosized by Art? It was idle to paint a lily, but to cut a gem was to render its beauty ideal. How could the artist, holding the gem against the disk, or working at it with his graver through the oil and emery, have been able by the power of touch only, to have graven lines in which the lens could find no flaw? Herein sculpture excelled all other arts: the painter produced his effects by broad washes of colour, and in no painting in the world, perhaps, was there not one touch which revealed uncertainty; some shadow made opaque instead of translucent to conceal the weakness of colour in shade, some line of drawing not perfectly firm, something painted over. There were a hundred legitimate ways by which the painter could cloak a minute weakness. But for the gem engraver no such device was possible; each line had to be true, to an indivisible fraction of a millimeter; it was wrought in a hard and stubborn material, and no painting over could conceal a fault. From the beginning to the end of

his work the engraver had to go, not only faultlessly, but with dash and infinite spirit along the razor-edge of a hundred precipices; he could never retrace a step, a second too long against the wheel spoiled all that had gone before.

Art of this exacting kind was a severer mistress than the rules of life. It demanded perfection; a fault, however minute, put the artist's work into the second, the third, the tenth class,—it was all one. There were no undecided points in it: the thing was good, or it was bad; everything but a signal success was a total failure. Above all, the study was absorbing, and Percy felt it an exquisite thing to be able to be absorbed again.

Ernest Fellowes dined with him that evening, and found that Percy had recaptured his æsthetic loquacity. More than once in the last six months Ernest had said to him that he was only an amateur; that art was only a pastime to him; and Percy had denied it but feebly, for he had known that he would cheerfully have made a holocaust of all the pictures in the world for the brightness of Sybil's eyes. To-night, however, Fellowes retracted the accusation.

"I once called you a dilletante," he said, as he rose to go, "but I was wrong. I told you that you cared for pretty things."

Percy laughed.

"That is a terrible accusation," he said, "and I don't think it was ever true. Certainly I don't think it is true now!"

He paused a moment and then continued:

"Why should I not tell you all about it? I made a voyage, and I was shipwrecked; but I have scrambled to land, and I find I am not on a desert island. I mean to make no more voyages. I give it up. Women have become a perfect enigma to me. They became so as soon as I thought that I understood and was understood by one of them. Oh, I am not a misanthrope; but my fellow-creatures are beyond my power of comprehension, and I don't care for riddles. Of course Art is an eternal riddle; but one makes conscious and sure steps towards the understanding of it. It is not so with people. The better you think you know them, the more awful is the slap in the face which you eventually receive. I will have no more slaps in the face, thank you! I have taken sanctuary."

Fellowes poked the fire meditatively.

"You were always rioting into extremes," he said, "and this looks like another of them. Of course everyone who ever accomplishes anything only does it by going too far at first, and then getting gently toned down again; and I prophecy that some day you will find you have gone too far. And then perhaps you will pack your portmanteau, caulk up the leaks in your boat, and go on another voyage."

"Oh, prophecy away, my dear fellow, if it amuses you," said Percy, almost gaily.

For two months Percy held rigidly to a hermit's

life. He saw no one except Fellowes occasionally, and with him he talked of nothing except the particular thing he was studying. He shut himself up in his room for a week at a time, going out but occasionally to verify something at a museum or a picture gallery. He had no intention of writing a book on any of his subjects; simply he was filled with a passion of knowing all about certain schools of art. He worked, in fact, not like an amateur, but like an artist. Sometimes he found it terribly hard work, for in certain moments he questioned himself whether he was not on a futile quest, whether he could find happiness in such a life; in others he would be suddenly filled with a desire to be among his fellow-creatures again, to let his heart rise to his lips in happy talk; in others, he asked himself whether there was not something in the face of every man and woman which no art could ever express. Perhaps it was even that which Art was always driving at; the supreme artist, it might be, was he who perfectly comprehended a man or a woman. But he deliberately suppressed these questions, and, instead of trying to answer them, plunged into work again. He refused to see any visitor, or to pay any visits; for the time, at any rate, he was filled with a profound indifference to —almost a disgust of—the whole living world. There was another living world in the kingdom of Art, and in that, so he was ever telling himself, he would be safe.

Percy, in fact, made an attempt, as deliberate and, in its way, as criminal, as the effort of the sot to drown remembrance in debauchery; of the sensualist to bury the bitterness of one sin by the committal of another; or of the hopeless failure of the coward to put an end to his life. It differed only in this—that he, being by nature neither brute nor coward, used means less coarse than gin or a gun to attain his end; but the criminality of his purpose was the same. For life, not mere consciousness, but the sane and healthy duty of living in social intercourse with one's kind, is the great ordinance from Heaven; for it is nothing else than our duty towards our neighbour, which is our duty towards our God.

CHAPTER XVI.

The Meeting at the Concert.

THE history of Percy's renunciation of his property and his rupture with Sybil caused a certain sensation in the little world which is called the great. For the most part, the sympathies of that discerning body were entirely with Sybil; and they consoled her by saying that Percy must be mad, and that she had had a great escape in finding it out before instead of after her marriage, since it would have been so tiresome to have married a lunatic. Hospitals and the high line were delightful things to read about, and it was terrible to think of all the poor people with cancer and all those horrors; but you must take the world as you found it, especially when you found it contained three million pounds for you. The world had been kind enough to take for granted that Sybil was going to marry Percy for his money, and consequently when he renounced it, it was not in the least surprised and hardly made any ill-natured remarks at the fact that she renounced him. She had done it, so it appeared, quite of her own accord; which was lucky, since, of course, Lady Otterbourne would not have permitted the marriage. Those who had been unlucky enough to cross Lady Otterbourne's wishes usually

remembered it. She had an inimitable manner of sailing calmly on, like a big liner charging down on a fishing smack, leaving her unfortunate victim a tiny wreck on the infinite sea. Even if she was so forbearing as not to sink you, she bruised and battered you, and, so to speak, knocked all your paint off, which was very expensive and disconcerting.

She had always been a practical woman, one who did not waste time after a defeat in crying or bewailing herself; and on this occasion, when Percy, unique among mankind, had trampled her schemes in the dust, she picked herself up with amazing swiftness, and instantly began to conduct the siege of Mr. Arthur Carnegie. That polite and gentlemanly fortress had been, it will be remembered, on the point of capitulation before the appearance of Percy, and Lady Otterbourne did not anticipate any long delay before it surrendered. Her guns, one might say, were still in position, and there was no fresh mobilization to be done. Carnegie, as it happened, was only too willing to submit, and his purchase of Abbotsworthy as soon as it was put up in the market was a strategical move to expedite what Lady Otterbourne looked upon as his surrender.

He was a singularly level-headed person and regarded the world with a clear eye, unclouded by sentiment. He was by way of being a friend of Percy's, and he would never have done to anyone

what he considered a shabby trick. But Percy had broken with Sybil definitely and irrevocably, and no consideration, however exalted an idea one might have of friendship, could forbid one trying to get what one's friend apparently did not want, or at any rate was not willing to pay the price for. Abbotsworthy was again in the market, and it was natural to suppose that Percy wanted to sell it. Carnegie did not attempt to tell himself that he bought it in order to do a kindness to Percy, but he did emphatically tell himself that to buy it was not unkind. He considered the purchase, indeed, a rather clever move. There was a great appropriateness in Sybil's becoming mistress of Abbotsworthy after all, and she could not fail to notice a certain significance in his buying it. Ever since she was engaged to Percy she had seemed to him more to be desired than ever, and his purchase was a sort of guarantee that he was going to settle in England. He had had a slice of bad luck, so he considered, when she was engaged to Percy, but the sequel could not have been more fortunate. He told himself, with perfect justice, that he had a way of coming out on top, and it seemed that this affair promised to be no exception to the rule.

Percy had gone back to his work at the Foreign Office at the end of his two months' leave. Why he did so he scarcely knew, except that he had *au fond* a strong distaste for insane proceedings, and to give himself no escape from his hermit's life seemed

to him to have this tendency. Living as he did now among abstractions, definite facts and definite regular work appeared to him a sort of tonic. At heart already he knew that he was not made for a solitary life; the Arts, it is true, had consoled him, and had brought him through a terrible time, in which, except for them, he might have become bitter. But bitter he had not become, for he had left himself no time for morbid brooding. Deceived and disappointed as he felt, he had, with a certain manly independence, refused to dwell on the catastrophe. But he had gone like the drunkard to his bottle, and had besotted himself with tint and colour. Some who knew how completely he had effaced the affair from his mind, called him shallow, and said he had never loved Sybil. This was an entire mistake, as those who knew him best affirmed. Among them was Blanche.

He had taken to going to concerts again, and in the January of the next year he took a seat for four Wagner concerts which were to be given at St. James's Hall. The first of these was rather empty, but on coming to the second, he saw when he entered the hall that the place was densely packed. The first piece was on the point of beginning, and he sidled by rows of people to his seat. As he reached it the music began, and taking a hasty glance round he saw that Sybil was sitting next him. Beyond her and next her was Carnegie.

He had one moment's impulse to leave his seat,

but at the next he determined to stay. He bowed to Sybil, who turned her face away, and settled himself to listen to the *Tannhäuser* overture. It was exquisitely played, and before many moments were over he had half forgotten whom he was sitting next; and when it was finished he felt no impulse to go, but only an immense curiosity to see what he himself and what Sybil would do and say. He found the interest of his own situation quite absorbing.

Carnegie also had seen him, and, when the overture was over, Percy leaned forward.

"How are you?" he said. "We have not met since September."

Carnegie had an immense admiration for nerve, and certainly Percy possessed that to a very high degree. His manner was absolutely easy, without a shade of effort to be easy. Carnegie made some reply, and Percy looked at Sybil. She was dressed, as he had so often seen her, in white, with a satin riband at her neck and another at her waist. Her dress was a sort of half-toilette, cut high at the neck, but somewhat short in the sleeves, which were covered with bunches of lace; and she had no hat on. Round her neck she wore three rows of magnificent pearls, and it was not till Percy had looked at them twice that he remembered that they were those that he had given her and which she had never sent back. He was desperately inclined to laugh, the thing struck him as inexpressibly comic;

and not till that moment did he realize and formulate to himself how completely his love for her was dead. He looked at her long, as he might look at a beautiful statue—critically and intelligently, and it seemed to him that she had never been so beautiful. Never had such an exquisite piece of modelling come from Nature's hands; there was no flaw in it, it was a piece of workmanship as fine as one of his favourite gems. She was breathing rather quickly, with suppressed but evident agitation, and the moonlight pearls round her neck moved gently like the heaving of a sea asleep. Percy saw it—saw that it was this meeting with him, and his long gaze at her, which had disconcerted her, and, with the quick compunction of a gentleman, he spoke to her. Once he had spoken, he thought she might be at her ease; what he could not do was to go away.

"Lady Otterbourne is in London?" he asked. "I saw in the paper she had been having influenza. I hope she is better. Half London seems to have had it."

The perfectly natural tone of his voice, as he had expected, reassured Sybil.

"Yes, she is better, thanks," she said, looking at him for the first time. "In fact, she meant to come here to-night. How beautifully they did the overture."

"Yes, it was wonderfully done," he said. "And how extraordinarily full the place is. Last week

it was quite empty, but to night there really is not a vacant place."

They talked together quite naturally for a moment or two, till the second piece began, and in the interval between the parts Percy and Carnegie strolled to the *foyer* and smoked a cigarette. Carnegie had something to say, which he found difficult. He did not know whether certain news had reached Percy. In any case he thought there could be no harm in mentioning what he soon must know, even if he did not already. In any case, the fact that Percy had found himself and Sybil alone at a concert must have given him a hint.

"It's to come off directly after Easter," he said at length.

Percy looked at him inquiringly for a moment. The remark was not *à propos* of what they had been talking about.

"I beg your pardon," he began, when suddenly he understood. "Ah, your marriage with Lady Sybil," he said, "I never congratulated you. Please accept my congratulations now."

He shook hands with him, then suddenly laughed.

"It will be pleasant for her going back to Abbotsworthy," he said, with uncontrollable bitterness. "She admired Abbotsworthy enormously, I remember."

Then he recollected himself with a flush of shame and contrition.

"I beg your pardon," he said; "I don't know how I came to say that."

They got back into the hall before the second part began, and Percy took his seat again next Sybil.

"I have to congratulate you," he said, in a low voice, "and I do so, Sybil, from my heart. I believe you will have a very good husband, and I sincerely hope you will be happy."

She did not raise her eyes; but she felt for one moment a pang of shame for all she had done from the first moment that she had seen Percy, down to this pitiful appearance, wearing his jewels. It was a sorry story that the recording angel had against her.

"You were always generous," she said, and her hand wandered nervously and involuntarily to the row of pearls round her neck.

He saw the action and understood it. It was terribly difficult either to speak or to be silent. Then, just as the music began:

"They are still my wedding present to you, Sybil," he said, with admirable quietness.

She looked up at him, and he saw that her eyes were brimming. At that he got up, and in his healthy soul there was infinite pity for the girl, and no grain of reproach. It was a good moment.

"Perhaps I should have gone at once," he whispered, "but I wanted very much to speak to you. Please forgive me, Sybil."

And nodding to Carnegie he again sidled out past

rows of indignant people, treading on pairs of feet which seemed quite innumerable and enormous.

Carnegie had seen that the two words which Sybil and Percy had exchanged had some significance. He was not naturally a meddling man; but he argued that when a bride-elect has a short interview with a man whom she has jilted which makes her cry, the bridegroom-elect has a right to ask what it has been about. And as they were driving away, he said firmly and quietly:

"Tell me what Percy said to you which made you cry."

Sybil, who was to promise to obey him in a few weeks' time, had already shown signs of being willing to do so. Carnegie was not a brute; but he was a man who got himself obeyed, and his requests were usually reasonable.

"It was about the pearls," she said, "which he gave me."

"Those you have on?" asked he.

"Yes."

"Why, they must be worth a fortune," he said. "And why didn't you send them back? I think that's real mean, Sybil."

"I know it was," she said; "and he has given me them again as a wedding present."

"Well, if you can wear them now without being sick," he replied with much directness, "I don't mind your keeping them."

Sybil pursed her lips together. Arthur was almost coarse sometimes.

"Of course, if you say that, I shall have to send them back," she said; and that salutary moment of shame was drowned in sudden fretful anger with Carnegie.

"I am sure you won't do that," he replied. "Besides, Percy wouldn't like it. He's one of the best of fellows," he added.

Percy meantime had walked back along Piccadilly to St. James' Street. He felt as if he had been through some dreaded ordeal, which had turned out not to be an ordeal at all. Now that he had seen Sybil again, he discovered that what he had been dreading, what had made himself shun the world, was, in large measure, the fear of being brought, however indirectly, into contact with her, either by the sight of her, or even by the most distant allusion to her. But the moment he saw her, he felt only intense curiosity to see how they would behave to each other. He had thought their meeting would be like the handling of an unhealed wound; and now for the first time when the old wound had been touched, did he know that it was raw no longer, but healthy normal flesh. In some subtle way, too, the sight of her had waked him up amazingly. Her incomparable beauty, which he felt he had never appreciated till now, and his absolute indifference to it except as beauty, was at the same time a stimulus and a consolation. He had lain in

bed, as it were, for these months, and now that he got up he found he was well. Once again the mystery and attraction of crowds asserted itself, and he strolled slowly along drinking in the streets like a thirsty man.

It was a fine night and warm for winter, and the pavements were full of the indescribable froth of the London streets. Newspaper boys were shouting the horrible and revolting details of an East-end murder and the birth of a Royal Prince, all in one breath; the lounger of the streets stared at every face that passed him; under the gas lamps of Burlington House stood two Members of Parliament and a Cabinet Minister, who looked like a butler out of place, conversing earnestly; gaudy, faded-looking women made eyes at the passers-by; an elderly clergyman fled past Percy with horror written on every line of his face, as if he had unexpectedly found that the world was disconcertingly wicked; a policeman stood in mid-street in the stress of a roaring spat of admirable law-abiding omnibuses and hansoms, and stopped this flood and let out that with a wave of the hand, like a lock-master, or like a conductor controlling an intelligent orchestra; a dog, carrying on its neck a box for the alms of those charitably inclined towards the Prevention of Cruelty to Children, trotted amiably along smiling and smelling at interesting corners, and a particularly seedy-looking individual sold copper-plated collar-studs at three a penny.

Percy could have laughed aloud at finding himself able again to take joy in the inimitable bustle; he crossed the road for the pleasure of recrossing it; and when he reached St. James' Street, instead of turning down it, in the direction of his home, he continued his walk along Piccadilly towards the Park. As he passed the Berkeley Hotel, the doors were thrown open, and five or six people, three of them women in evening dress, came across the pavement towards a couple of carriages which were waiting, going home no doubt after dinner. In a moment Percy recognized one of them.

"Oh, Blanche," he cried to her, shaking her by both hands, "I have just found that I am alive again, and it is good to be alive. I have walked along a real street, and it is full of real people. Let me come to lunch to-morrow."

"I congratulate you, Percy," she said. "Yes, do come, unless you've forgotten the way."

"I had forgotten it," he said, "but I remember it now."

She gave him a quick pleased nod, and got into the brougham where her father and mother were waiting for her.

Percy turned and went home. It was still only half-past ten, and on the table lay a book with some engravings after Claude in it, which he had been reading that afternoon. Three hours ago he had found it so absorbing that in reading it he had left himself only ten minutes for dinner before the

concert. But now he looked at it doubtfully a moment, sat down with an effort, and read a page. As he turned over it struck him that he had not an idea of what he had been reading, and he applied himself again to it. But the second attempt was no better than the first, and he shut it up and went to the window. The blinds had not been drawn, and he stood there some little while looking out. The long lines of lighted gas led down the hill in sharp perspective to St. James's Palace, and the illuminated clock-face shone out through the thick air like a large moon behind mist. Streams of that inimitable invention, the human race, passed and repassed, and Percy found himself gazing with an intentness and interest that the admirable work on Claude could not rouse in him. At last he turned.

"Thank God for this world," he said.

CHAPTER XVII.

The Resurrection.

PERCY woke next morning slowly and luxuriously, with a sense of interest in the day which increased as his sleep evaporated off him. During the last few months the thoughts of the gems he would examine that day, and the pictures he would look at, had never showed themselves rose-coloured at waking. Though he had been able to interest himself, as it seemed to him at the time, passionately, when he was at work, the waking thought that there would be another day, which both before he met Sybil and up to the day of the catastrophe had been habitually rapturous, had turned cold and dead, as unluminous as the East at sunset. The joy of mere life, the simple elemental pleasures of existence,—like bathing when one was hot, eating when one was hungry,—had deserted him. But this morning they seemed to be with him again, and consequently, since the joy of lying in bed is known only to the happy, he lay with his hands clasped behind his head, staring at the ceiling, counting the number of sprigs of fern on a line of his bedroom paper, and getting confused about half-way across the room; wondering what the time was, and forbearing to look at his watch which ticked close to his elbow.

He even tried to persuade himself that he had not been called, and thought it quite possible that his clothes, which had been arranged on a chair near his bed, had been put there overnight by his valet.

A little gentle tap came at the door, and Percy, knowing who it was, shut his eyes again and pretended to be asleep. He heard Blessington come on tiptoe round the screen by the head of the bed, then very quietly she went across to the window and drew down the blind again to shut out the blink of yellow daylight which filtered through the panes. Percy opened his eyes.

"It would be a pity to wake him," he said, imitating Blessington's voice to perfection.

Blessington had the faculty of adoration, which is rare in these days, and she exercised it exclusively on Percy.

"I thought you wouldn't get up yet," she said. "Shall I tell Clarke to bring you your breakfast in bed?"

"What time is it?" he asked.

"Half-past nine," said Blessington, "by me. But I'm a little slow."

Percy groaned.

"I've only slept nine hours," he said hopelessly. "Isn't it terrible for me? It was hardly worth while going to bed."

"Well then, shall I tell Clarke to light you a bit of fire for you to dress by?" asked she; "or I'll do it myself in a minute."

"Not even that, Blessington," he said. "Oh, I am happy this morning!"

Blessington looked at him a moment with dim eyes.

"Bless you, dear," she said, and left the room.

Percy got lazily out of bed, and went into his bathroom next door. There was a big marble tank sunk in the floor, and stripping off his night-shirt he took a long breath and plunged in, head under water. How pleasant the sting of the cold water was, and how soul-satisfying the glow of the skin that his rough towel gave! The tiles of the bathroom were cold to the feet, and he went back to his bedroom with his hair dripping and uncombed from the water and finished his drying there, standing on the thick Persian rug by his bed. Everything went right that morning: his razor was sharp, his soap showed a positive propensity to lather, he did not drop his toothbrush into the water in which he had washed his hands, and it seemed that unseen hands managed the buttoning of studs and braces, and the lacing of his boots. Above all, there was another day, whole batches of minutes, almost innumerable.

The morning passed before he was aware that he had finished breakfast. It is true that he rode for an hour or so on his bicycle, that he called at several shops, wrote a couple of letters at the Bachelors' Club, and read the advertisements in the *Daily Telegraph;* but before he had realised

that the hours were on the move, he was already late for lunch at the Stoakleys', where Lady Stoakley and Blanche, who were alone, had begun without him.

"I have no excuse of any kind," he said as he entered the room, "and it is delightful to see you again, Lady Stoakley. It was the luckiest chance that I happened to pass the Berkeley so simultaneously—you see what I mean. Anyhow, here I am: I have seen nobody for several months, and it won't do; here and now I renounce the error of my ways."

He looked round with beaming frankness.

"Oh, I was wrong, I know," he said, "but how is one to learn wisdom except by the assiduous and constant practise of folly? I like profiting by my own mistakes, not by the mistakes of other people. But one has to pay a huge price for a little wisdom. Yet it is better than learning wisdom on the cheap. Yes, last night only I abandoned the hermitage, and the brotherhood of one is broken up. I went to a concert—why should I not tell you?—and I sat next to Sybil. I never saw her so incomparably beautiful, and I drank her beauty in till I was in love with life again. At least that is one explanation; of course there are plenty of others. Also, I heard from Carnegie that she was to marry him after Easter, and I swear that I congratulated them both with absolute sincerity."

It was hard to reply to such surprisingly frank

statements, and Percy went on, after eating a quantity of frills and chopped carrots:

"I suppose I should be called 'a cure' if I went to see a doctor," he said. "Are these remarks in bad taste? I rather think they are, but I can't trouble to think of matters of taste to-day. Taste is only a veneer, a superficial sort of varnish; I hate taste!"

Blanche laughed.

"Oh, Percy," she cried, "were you ever accused of being consistent? How often, with a very solemn face, have you told me that taste is the only thing in the world?"

"Consistent? Who wants to be consistent?" he said. "I couldn't be consistent if I tried, so it is lucky I don't want to. Only, I am alive again. Being alive really is exceedingly different to being dead. It sounds simple, doesn't it; but that is the sum of the wisdom I have learned in these last months. The point is, that I have learned it. Yes, some more chicken, please."

Percy stayed an unconscionable time after lunch, and talked a great deal. Lady Stoakley had to go out at three, and she left the two together in her room, Percy smoking cigarettes, and both of them talking at once, neither pretending for a moment to be listening to what the other was saying. Percy had large arrears of unspoken criticisms to make on every branch of art under the sun; but after either condemning wholesale a hundred artists whom

Blanche had always supposed to be the most notable of all time, or insisting that a hundred others of whom she had never heard were each of them the only man on the earth who had ever been endowed with a spark of the divine fire, he spoke of more personal matters, and to his dissertation on these subjects Blanche listened without interrupting or contradicting.

"I met her last night, as I told you," he said, "and it was revealed to me in a flash that the whole past was irrevocably over. I had suspected before that my love was dead, at that moment I knew it. Dead, dead, and buried clean out of sight. Yet I was in earnest. Six months ago Sybil was the whole world to me. Now, nothing whatever, only a most beautiful woman. Do you know, Blanche, what happened on that last morning at Abbotsworthy?"

"Vaguely only. Tell me."

"Well, I told Lady Otterbourne and Sybil that I felt I could not touch the money my grandfather had made by money-lending. Do you not understand the feeling? Then I had an interview with Lady Otterbourne alone, who told me pretty plainly that Sybil could not marry a poor man. I am glad to say that I told her I did not believe her, that Sybil would decide for herself; and when I went to ask Sybil immediately afterwards, I was not frightened or in doubt at all. I never dreamed—well, that my money was so much more important

than I. Oh, it was very salutary! The odd thing is that I wasn't angry. It was such a tremendous surprise."

"And she, Sybil?"

"She agreed with her mother," remarked Percy, "wholly and entirely."

Blanche held out her hand.

"Poor dear Percy," she said, "you don't know how sorry I was for you, but I did not think you wanted to see anyone. That was why I did not come. I had a great belief in your sanity, and I was not the least afraid of your growing bitter or blowing out your brains. When people are working out their own salvation it is always well to leave them alone. But I wrote to you."

"Yes, I remember," said he. "I have got the letter still."

"I want to ask you one thing," said Blanche. "If before you had absolutely decided to throw up the money you had known that Sybil would act as she did, would you have done it?"

Percy considered a moment.

"I find it hard to say," he replied. "You see it was really no case of decision at all with me. Nothing else for a moment seemed to me possible. On the other hand, what Sybil did never seemed to me possible. So really I hardly know. But I think that I should not have acted differently, just because I could not. But even if there had been a decision, if I had realised then that Sybil's affection for me

was dependent on pounds sterling, I should not have wished for it on such terms."

"Yet you loved her?"

"I know I did," said he, "but—but—oh, do you not understand?"

There was silence and soon Percy rose.

"I must go," he said; "but may I come back?"

"Surely," said she, smiling at him.

"And may I come back often, Blanche?" he asked.

She laughed.

"Yes, if you will go away now," she said.

Fellowes dined with Percy that night, and came prepared to find a haggard student of obscure artists to entertain him with abstruse information. His host was not down when he arrived; but as he waited for him, his very acute and observant eye detected, so it thought, a subtle change which had passed over the room since he had seen it last. At first he could not say exactly what it was, for on first view it was as undefinable as the bounding line which separates winter from spring, but the details which made up the impression slowly detached themselves from the vagueness and became outlined. Percy's armchair, for instance, was drawn up to the fire in a position as if it had been lately used, while the table where he worked had the air of a house with the blinds drawn down, in the absence of the family. Near the armchair on the floor lay a book open on the carpet, and Fellowes,

picking it up, observed that it was a copy of *Gerald Eversley's Friendship*, which Percy had covered with pictures illustrative of that remarkable text. Several cigarette ends lay in the fender, and several little streaks of ash on the hearth-rug, and Fellowes made the admirable deduction that Percy had been smoking cigarettes and reading *Gerald Eversley's Friendship*. This betokened either very low spirits or exceedingly cheerful ones. He turned over the leaves of the book to see if there were any further indications, and finding a new illustration of Lord Venniker, that amazing nobleman, in a frock-coat and a bowler hat at Harrow Station, he decided that Percy was in cheerful spirits. No large books on gems or other branches of art strewed the tables, all were in their shelves; and on the piano there stood open no example of what Fellowes called the explosive method, which meant one large chord like a bombshell followed by a *mêleé* of small black ones, but the dance music out of *Henry VIII.* And as he heard Percy's foot upon the threshold of the open door:

"Enter the amateur!" he cried.

Percy ran at him across the room, and Fellowes dodged behind the table.

"The devoted slave of the divine mistress Art *never* rages," he observed with emphasis.

Percy said something which sounded like "Confound the divine mistress," but his words were drowned in a sudden rush he made round the cor-

ner of the table, upsetting it and bringing it to the ground with a frightful crash.

He gazed upon the ruin with perfect equanimity.

"Say you saw Percy in the ruins of—No. 9 St. James' Street," he observed fatuously. "Come to dinner, Ernest."

The two went through the folding-doors into the dining-room, took their seats, and ate soup in silence. Percy drummed on the table with his fingers, and then suddenly laughed.

"Kindly explain," said Ernest.

"I will after dinner. Oh, I've drawn a new picture of Lord Venniker! It is in the grand style."

"I saw it. It seems to me to have the note of nobility," observed Ernest.

"Glad you think so. I am not sure, but I think I must get the book interleaved. I have several more drawings in my head."

"I expected something of this sort," said Ernest.

"Why?"

Well, I looked round the room before you came down. I found cigarette ash on the hearth-rug, and *Gerald Eversley*. Also your armchair drawn up to the fire. There was the *Henry VIII.* music on the piano, and the works dealing with the Divine Mistress neatly in their shelves. I saw——"

"My name is Sherlock Holmes of Baker Street," interrupted Percy.

"Quite right. How did you guess?"

"It was an induction, not a guess," said Percy. "Have some more fish? No? Then I will. Yes, I've passed a very remarkable twenty-four hours, or, to be exact, twenty-three."

"Don't tell me. I want to make a shot."

"Well?" Percy looked round, but his servant was out of the room.

"You have heard certain news about a person in whom you were once very much interested."

Percy shook his head.

"That is ingenious," he said, "and true. But that was not the first cause of it. But probably that had something to do with it."

"There is nothing like cold water to wake one up," said Ernest, "that and a slap in the face."

"Ah, the slap in the face didn't answer with me," said Percy. "I'm really afraid, Ernest, that I must have been precious near becoming cynical or misanthropic, or something silly of that kind."

"I never thought you would keep it up," said Ernest.

"But I was serious," said Percy. "I was perfectly serious."

"I didn't think you were posing."

"That was exceedingly kind of you. The cigarettes are by you. Shall we sit here or go into the other room? At ten, by the way, we are going to see the *Tramp Bicyclist* at the Empire. I love the Empire. It combines amusement with instruction, and is funny without being prudish."

"That sounds all right. I was afraid you were going to take me to hear Wagner, or something very classical and tedious."

"No, the Wagner concert was last night. Let's sit here. It all happened at the Wagner concert."

"All what?"

"All my little transformation," said Percy. "A match, please. Thanks. It is a very short story. I went into my place like a crab, all sideways, as one does when one is late, past an interminable row of indignant and apparently huge people, and found myself in a stall next Sybil."

"That is good," said Ernest; "the British public appreciates that sort of thing. Well?"

"Yes, it would make quite a good scene in one of your rotten little stories, if you had any sense of style. It is odd to me, considering how much you write, how badly you do it. On the other side of Sybil was Carnegie, looking very cool and gentlemanly. For a moment I thought of bolting; but I stopped, because I was so frightfully interested to know what she and I would do. At the moment I could not guess. And then I made the grand discovery."

"What was that?"

"That she was more beautiful than the morning, and that I did not love her. Then came in the second factor at which you made such an ingenious and correct guess. What an exquisite pleasure each of these discoveries was! In the interval Car-

negie and I smoked a cigarette together and he told me the marriage would come off after Easter. We went back, and I congratulated Sybil with all my heart. I am glad to have known a girl as beautiful as that. I also told her she might keep—no, I won't tell you that. But there is the history of it. The change was made. I went out and literally danced down Piccadilly. Opposite the Berkeley I saw Blanche."

"Did you dance with her?"

"No, but I lunched with her to-day."

Ernest was silent a moment.

"Did it ever occur to you that you were a profound egoist?" he asked at length.

"Never. How could it? The egoist never thinks of himself as egoistical. Of course I am an egoist: that is no discovery. But to do myself justice, I am quite as interested in other people as I am in myself, though how they strike me is what matters. The critic always sees things as they strike himself, never as in themselves they really are, as that curious school-inspector said. But there is one point which is so odd."

"Is it about yourself or other people?"

"Oh, myself, of course. Don't interrupt. To think that last September only I was simply head-over-ears in love with Sybil, and now, only four months later, I am master of myself again."

"You have got over it, that is all," said Ernest. "What a great many words an egoist

seems to want in order to express a very simple thing."

"Yes, but how quickly, how thoroughly I have got over it! She is to me a beautiful woman, that is all."

Ernest turned his chair round to the fire, and flicked his cigarette ash into the grate.

"I don't see what the actual lapse of time has to do with getting over a thing," he said. "If one gets over a thing quickly, one is called either insincere or shallow. That is libellous. The people who continue mourning and regretting a thing are either idle people who are too lazy to control their minds and emotions, or undervitalised people who have no rebound in them. Supposing I lost sixpence, and was shut up in a tower to think over my loss without books to read or people to talk to, I should go on thinking about that sixpence for years."

Percy laughed.

"That is a good explanation," he said. "I, as you know, instantly, or rather after a week of work, plunged into Art. I take off my hat to Art. I am very grateful to her. She consoled me excellently, and kept me from going sour. For weeks I thought of nothing else. Then that incident happened last night, and I find I am alive again."

"And had lunch with Blanche Stoakley to-day," observed Ernest.

"Yes, and am going to see the *Tramp Bicyclist*

to-night," said Percy, jumping up. "We'll walk; the streets are so jolly. Ernest," and he took him by the arm, "they are full of men and women, and all these months I have never remembered that."

The sight of Percy had been extraordinarily pleasant to Blanche, and his abandonment of his absurd hermit's life not less so. That the sight of him was also strangely exciting to her, she would not admit to herself, though it was quite indubitably true. Frankly she had been disappointed in him in the autumn; she had hoped and believed he would have conducted himself more successfully. Anyone, she told herself, could go and shut himself up and see none of his friends. Percy ought to have taken a finer and, she added, a more characteristic line. No doubt the suddenness of the blow had staggered him; it was natural that his world should seem *boulversé*, but it was a confession of incompetence to make a hermit of himself. True, as everyone said, and as he himself had told her, he had buried himself in work,—he had made one passion take the place of another,—but in order to study Art there was no reason why you should give a shut door to your best friends. Blanche confessed that she could not suggest a line that should be striking, but she held an extremely high opinion of Percy's possibilities, and in this he had acted below his best.

Anyhow, the treatment had succeeded. There was no denying that to day he had been quite com-

pletely himself again. Like Fellowes, she did not think it argued either shallowness of nature, nor shallowness in his love of Sybil, that in so few months he had buried the past. Had he been less successful, had he become melancholy, bitter, ready to say his life was spoiled, she would have given him the sympathy that all true women feel for what is weak and inferior; but she would in no way have considered that such signs indicated faithfulness, or strength of affection. She, too, would have put them down to a lack of other interests, and a feeble vitality. Six months ago, when she had communed with herself alone, and confessed that Percy was more to her than other men, she too had a struggle; but she had conquered her momentary distaste of things. The thing could not be. Very good; there was no more to be said, but thank Heaven there were still plenty more things to be done.

"Faithfulness," she had said once, long ago, to Percy, "as so many people understand it, is a sign of weakness, not of strength. People seem to think it becoming to put their minds and emotions into crape for years; and grief, quite genuine grief, often has the awful effect of making so many people pose. They cut their mourning by the most fashionable patterns; and, if one believes, as I most certainly do, that a bereavement is not sent one altogether blindly, but with design and purpose, it is an insult to the Power that sends it to behave as if the object

of it could possibly have been to cripple your affections and thwart your energies."

To a certain extent, Percy had succumbed, had confessed himself beaten. He had cut himself off from the living, breathing world, which is not less essential to the life of a man than his heart or his lungs. But that was over, and he had come back; he had ceased to be insane, he held up his head again. Also, she recollected (and suddenly put the stopper on her recollections) he was free.

Sybil had told Lady Otterbourne about her meeting with Percy the evening before, and about his renewed gift of the pearls to her, at which her mother came near to feeling a sense of shame. His generosity to them both had had something splendid about it, and she knew with annoying vividness how incredibly mean Sybil must have seemed to him. Sybil as a matter of fact had consulted her about the returning of the pearls immediately after the breaking off of the match, and Lady Otterbourne had advised her to keep them till he sent for them.

"You cannot send fifty thousand pounds worth of jewels through the penny post," she had said, "Percy will certainly send for them and you had better keep them till he does. They must, of course, be delivered to his representative."

This had happened in September; but as the days went on, and still Percy did not send for the pearls, Lady Otterbourne began to wonder whether

he ever would. To say that she contemplated a theft would be grossly overstating the thing; but it more than once struck her that pearls always suited Sybil very well. Percy, it was to be supposed, was broken-hearted: at any rate, he had shut himself up and would not see his friends, and Lady Otterbourne compounded with her conscience over the delay by saying that it would not be delicate to intrude on his grief. She meant—yes, she quite distinctly meant to send the pearls back to him sometime soon, but where was the hurry?

Sybil was engaged to Arthur Carnegie soon after Christmas, and the engagement was made public early in January. The pearls had been in Lady Otterbourne's own jewel safe all the autumn, and Sybil had not worn them; indeed, it was only a couple of nights before her meeting with Percy at the Wagner concert that her mother had come into her room as she was dressing for dinner with the case in her hand.

"I thought you might like to wear the pearls just once or twice," she said. "Of course, Percy will soon send for them. He will send for them as soon as he hears of your marriage, I daresay. Wear them to-night, Sybil. How magnificent they are!"

Sybil looked at them.

"Yes, they are wonderful," she said. "Mother, do you think Percy means me to keep them? He *surely would* have sent for them by now, would he

not? I remember his giving me them so well. 'They are your own, your very own,' he said."

"Wear them to-night, anyhow," said Lady Otterbourne.

"Would not Arthur think it strange?" she asked. "Might he not ask how I got them? That would not be pleasant."

"My dear, Arthur never asks such questions. Probably he will not notice them. Men don't see pearls."

But when Sybil told Lady Otterbourne this morning about what Percy had said to her, she felt almost ashamed.

"He really is very generous," she said. "How did he look, Sybil? Did he look much changed?"

"No, I don't think he did," said Sybil. "Oh, mother, do you think I treated him very badly?"

"It is too late to think of that, Sybil," said her mother. "What is done, is done. He was obstinate; he persisted in doing a mad, absurd thing. Think of that; perhaps that may be some comfort to you."

"Comfort? Why should I want comfort?" demanded Sybil, with the foxy look in her face.

"You asked if I thought you had treated him badly. I supposed you felt ashamed. I cannot say that I think you treated him well."

Sybil flushed.

"You would not have allowed me to marry him," she said hotly. "I knew it was impossible."

"Yes, but you saved me the trouble of not allowing you," said Lady Otterbourne, very calmly. "Surely you and I can deal frankly with each other. There is not a pin to choose between us. You had no intention of marrying him, when he insisted on giving up the money. I did not say a word to dissuade you."

"You entirely approved what I did."

"Entirely. I never denied it. Besides, one does not adopt an approving or a disapproving attitude to what is necessary. Do not let us discuss the matter, Sybil. There is no earthly object gained by irritating ourselves and each other. Percy has behaved most generously. You and I have not. Let us admit it and forget it. By the way, it would be well to have the pearls insured at once. We ought to have had it done long ago, but one expected from day to day that Percy would send for them. Perhaps he has had them insured already. No doubt he will let you know where they are insured, if so."

Sybil did not think it necessary to enlighten her mother as to Carnegie's view of her acceptance of the gift, and the two parted with a slight but not uncommon feeling of resentment on each side—Sybil feeling injured by her mother's frankness, which she thought brutal; Lady Otterbourne by Sybil's little attempts to gloss things over, which she considered futile and nonsensical.

CHAPTER XVIII.

The Song of Songs.

SYBIL'S marriage was celebrated on the Tuesday after Easter, and was a very magnificent affair. The settlements which Mr. Carnegie made on his bride were immense; and it was said, definitely, that he intended to settle down in England. Also, it was commonly reported that Lady Otterbourne professed herself to be satisfied; and that was thought to be saying a great deal. Among other jewels, the bride wore a magnificent necklace of three rows of pearls, which were not mentioned as being the gift of the bridegroom, and which, in consequence, were generally supposed by the amiably inclined to be "Roman."

Percy had been asked to the wedding, a fact much commented on. His own comment, however, was the most interesting. He read the card with a face of blank surprise, and then laughed for five minutes. But he had gone down to spend a week with Mrs. Montgomery, at her house near Goring, where he had stayed once before in the early autumn, and he did not propose to go up with her to the ceremony.

Mrs. Montgomery was rather disappointed. She had thought to herself how extremely dramatic it would be if Percy was to appear at the wedding

polite and radiant and normal. She was always wanting her friends to put themselves into dramatic situations for her amusement, and she considered it selfish if they did not. She and Percy were old friends, and she stated her view very clearly to him.

"It would be very striking if you came, Percy," she said; "and it is most disappointing of you not to. What reason can you have? You have quite got over it, and you ought to show the world that you have. Why don't you come?"

Percy sat up with a twinkle in his eye.

"I might be a professional beauty" he said, "and you a rising photographer. You are always wanting to pose one."

"Don't be rude; it doesn't suit you. Why don't you come?"

"I hate traveling on Bank Holiday," said Percy feebly.

"Tuesday after Easter is not Bank Holiday," said Mrs. Montgomery rather triumphantly. "The Monday is."

"Oh, but it's Leap Year," said Percy, "and that throws Bank Holiday one day further on."

"Well, if you won't come, you won't" said she. "And you'll have to entertain the Stoakleys if they get here before I am back. There are some people," she continued meditatively, "who always get everywhere rather before the time they are expected."

"Then I'll expect them to lunch," said Percy.

"If so, they will be here by one."

"I know what you mean," said he, "but I don't think it is characteristic of the Stoakleys—of which of them, for instance?"

"Of Blanche, certainly," said Mrs. Montgomery, "though she only does so mentally. She always is rather quicker than one expects. She is so pretty that one expects her to be stupid, which she is not."

"No, she certainly is not stupid."

Mrs. Montgomery paused. Perhaps Percy was not going to disappoint her after all. The professional beauty was posing of its own accord.

"I wish you liked her a little more," she said at length.

"Why?"

"Because you might marry her, perhaps."

Percy shut his book—it was not on the subject of Art—with a bang.

"Don't you think I like her enough for that?" he asked.

"Really, Percy, how you startle me. I hate the young generation. They are always chucking surprises about like schoolboys snowballing. How much you like her is a matter for yourself to decide."

"I decided long ago. It was a good thing I didn't tell you, as you so dislike surprises."

"Do you mean you are going to propose to her?"

Percy looked at her with most irritating deliberation.

"I think you ask more questions than any one I ever saw," he said.

"I certainly receive fewer answers from you than from anyone I ever saw," retorted Mrs. Montgomery. "But I am delighted. Oh! I see, *that* is the reason why you will not come to the wedding. Pray accept a blessing, as Miss Flite said."

"It was very kind of Miss Flite," said Percy lazily.

"It was more than you deserved," said she. "But I forgive you. She and her mother are both coming; he is not. What do you suppose Lady Stoakley will say to it?"

"Will say to what?" asked Percy, composedly.

"To your proposing to Blanche. How tiresome you are."

"I don't know. I haven't asked her."

"Doesn't it interest you?"

"Immensely. But I give you warning; I am not going to answer any more questions."

"That will be very rude of you, then."

Percy laughed.

"I like being rude to you, Mrs. Montgomery," he said, "because I like to see how very little effect it has on you. You certainly belong to the Pachyderms."

"Who are the Pachyderms?" asked Mrs. Montgomery with dignity.

"They are a very old family," said Percy, "and they have a tendency toward exploration, being im-

pervious to cold. Hurrah! here is tea. Do give me some tea quickly, because I'm going to fish afterwards till it gets dark."

During the weeks that had passed since January, Percy and Blanche had seen a great deal of each other. They had both the enviable faculty of picking up friendships exactly where they had left off, and neither had wasted any time about feeling their way back to their old intimacy. Blanche was a confirmed Wagnerite, and the two used to scour London together for concerts. But by degrees a new complexion came over their friendship, though it did not blunt the *camaraderie* which had so long subsisted between them. There began to form in Percy's mind another image which occupied the niche from which Sybil's had vanished so suddenly, and day by day he chiselled at it till it stood complete. It only remained to fall down and worship it.

The Stoakleys arrived about tea-time next day, neither later nor earlier than it was reasonable to expect them. It was a delicious spring evening, with a soft caressing air, and the inimitable sense of budding and growing things. Hawthorn and limes were already in leaf, and the other trees were hastening after them. It seemed that the aspect of the world grew more green every hour, that if one put one's ear to a tree-trunk one might hear the rush of the sap in the tingling boughs.

Lady Stoakley went to her room after tea, leav-

ing the others still out on the lawn. At Blanche's suggestion they wandered down to the riverside, and walked through the meadows thickly starred with daisies and buttercups. The sun was near to its setting, and had fired the thin clouds in the West with living rose. Thrushes threw their song abroad into the air with all the lavishness of mating time. Leaves lisped in the cool shadow of trees, and the grasses were long round the strolling feet. The willows by the water were enmeshed in a green net of leaves, and the beautiful river swung on its way in great sheets of mirrored sky. They had passed through the lawn and over the nearer fields in busy talk; but here a silence fell.

"Ah, it is spring!" said Percy, at length. "Spring, and the promise of all good things. I read the Song of Solomon last night, Blanche. Do you know it? 'For lo, the winter is past, the rain is over and gone; the flowers appear on the earth; the time of the singing birds is come.' They are singing; they are singing in my heart."

Percy paused.

"It has rung in my head all day," he said; "it seems to have been written for me. May I go on, Blanche?"

Blanche raised her eyes to his, but did not speak.

"'The fig tree putteth forth her green figs,'" said Percy very low, "'and the vines with the tender grape give a good smell. Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away.'"

For a long moment they stood there silent; then Percy gently drew Blanche towards him, and kissed her.

"'My beloved is mine,'" she whispered, "'and I am his.'"

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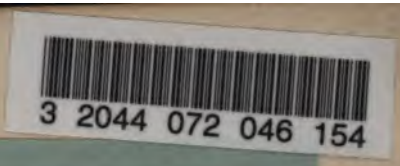

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